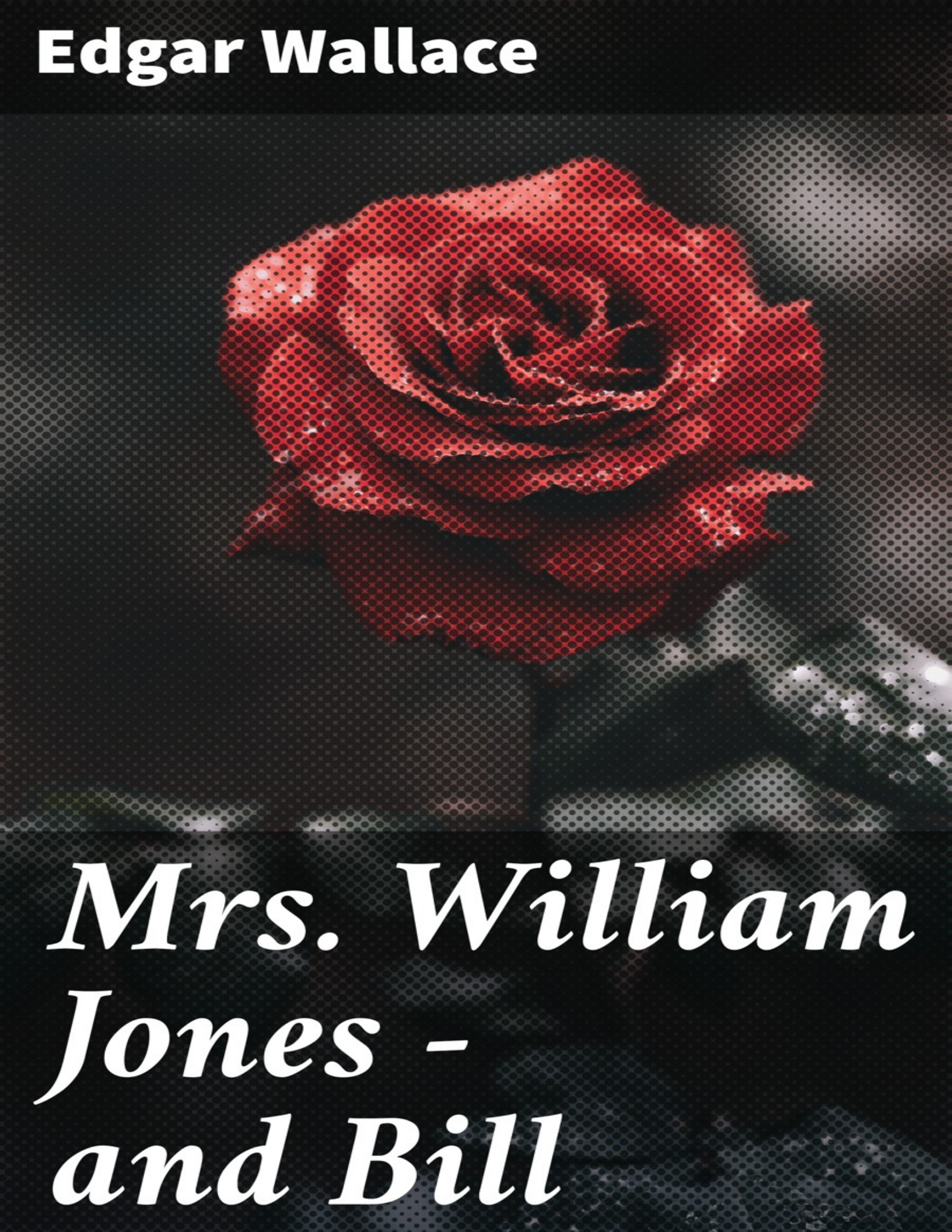
Edgar Wallace



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THE END

HER eyes were sleepy eyes, he noted that much, though as a rule he never looked twice at a woman, save in the cause of art. And her mouth, at the moment he was observing her, struck him as being lazy. He had never heard of a lazy mouth before, but that is just how it occurred to him. It was parted—"fly- catching"—he described it afterwards.

Yet she was quite an adorable person, with the figure that men make up stories about, that is to say, she had no definite figure at all, but there was just enough of her to occupy clothes, so that they seemed to fill the right amount of space.

The eyes were blue, dark blue, almost violet. The eyelashes (so he saw, being sophisticated) had the appearance of having been made up, they were so dark, whilst her hair was so-so, well not exactly fair—veiled gold (whatever he meant by that, and it certainly conveys a rough sense of subdued glory) was the colour he jotted down on his tablet.

For the rest, features conformed to the outstanding excellences, and neither discounted nor enhanced them. All this Bill Jones saw from his barn- like bedroom, which was on the ground floor of Ten Pines Hotel, which in turn was situated in the middle of a pleasant valley between sea and marsh.

The big windows of the room opened on to a broad and shady veranda, and it was on this "stoep" that the unaccountable lady reclined, her heels elevated to the veranda rail.

It was not a lady-like attitude. Miss Beryl Foster, who had come to Ten Pines every summer for twenty-nine years, and who occupied, by arrangement and tradition, the cheapest bedroom in the hotel, and the only easy-chair in the hotel parlour, said that in all those twenty-nine years she had never seen a *lady* in such a posture.

Miss Foster spent her days upon the veranda, knitting savagely a shapeless something which looked like a bath mat, but was probably something else. She knit with an air of gloomy courage which suggested that she was being punished for her sins, and recognised the justice of her punishment.

To Bill Jones the unaccountable lady was a fascinating object, transcending in picturesqueness the amber rocks that stood in amber pools, entirely surrounded by blue-green waters that foamed in chinese white about their bases.

Bill Jones was a good man but a bad artist. He was handsome in a rugged kind of way, and his name was really Bill Jones, his father having been born both Jones and eccentric. And he had christened or caused to be christened his infant son, just plain "Bill."

"You mean William?" said the officiating clergy.

"I mean Bill," said Bill's father firmly.

"And what are the other names?" the clergyman demanded anxiously.

"Jones," said Bill's father.

And so "Bill Jones" he was christened, and the clergy shivered as it pronounced the fateful words.

Bill really did not mind. The name fitted him. He was as tough as luck and as hard as lines, to apply the sayings of the slangster. He could box, swim, ride, leap, throw things, run and tackle. He could not paint. Obviously, the kind of pictures for which he was designed were not the kind of pictures designed by him. Nature lagged behind his palette. He belonged to a select art club, the members of which told one another at stated intervals, that they were ahead of their time. And it was probably true, for who knows what shape and colour things will take in a million years?

But Bill Jones differed from all other bad artists in this respect—he knew he was a bad artist. He knew that his visit to Ten Pines had nothing whatever to do with art study.

He looked at the beautiful girl and sighed.

"Oh lord!" he prayed, "if I were only an artist—what a head and ankle!"

Bill was away when she arrived. He had taken his colour-box and a small canvas out on to the lake.... there was a "right light," and he remembered how amazingly beautiful was the patch of young alders and rushes at the western corner.

A man, even a poor technician, might make a great picture of that. So he took his paint-box and punted across the water. He also took a line and tackle, for the pike fishing hereabouts is very good.

When he returned with four pike (one a nine-pounder) and a virgin canvas, Mrs. Carmichael, the landlady, regarded him curiously. She did not explain her mystery. And Bill found no solution until....

He was going to speak to the unknown lady. Up to now he had not dared to do more than admire in a furtive, public-spirited and detached manner the rare feast of beauty which fortune had brought to him. And Providence was on his side, for as he walked leisurely along the front of the veranda, the little high-heeled shoe which had been perched upon the rail fell almost at his feet.

"I'm awfully sorry."

Beauty was charmingly confused, put out a white, hand to take the shoe, and Bill's heart sank. There was no especial reason and certainly no intelligent reason why his heart should sink at the sight of a new wedding ring upon the proper finger of her hand.

"It must have fallen off," said Beauty more calmly, as she emptied the sand from its interior.

Bill was inclined to agree and, being unusually tongue-tied, the acquaintance might have ended then and there.

"You're an artist, aren't you?" she said. "How lovely it must be to paint beautiful pictures."

"It must be," agreed Bill honestly. "I'm sorry I've never had that experience."

She frowned.

"But you are the artist? Mrs. Carmichael pointed you out to me and said you were the artist, and asked me if I knew you. As she didn't tell me your name——"

"My name is Jones," said Bill modestly. He thought that it was not a thing he need boast about anyway. "Bill Jones."

Her mouth opened in a luscious O.

"William Jones!" she said hollowly.

He nodded.

"Bill, to be exact," he replied. "I haven't the pleasure——"

She hesitated only for the fraction of a second. The whole conversation was irregular, and not even the fortuitous circumstance of their occupying adjoining rooms justified this sudden exchange of intimacies.

"My name is Mrs. William Jones," she said rapidly. "My husband is a traveller."

"Indeed?" said Bill politely, and wanted to ask her whether at this precise moment her husband was fulfilling his professional duties.

"He's a chauffeur, I mean," said the girl, clearing her throat.

Bill was not shocked. He had known some very good chauffeurs in his time. He had also known some very bad ones. He hoped that she had not married a bad one. It would be dreadful to think of that frail and beautiful lady being married to a man who took cross-roads at top speed without sounding his klaxon.

Still he was depressed. The fact that her husband was a chauffeur had nothing whatever to do with the cause of the depression. He was depressed that she should marry anybody whether he was a traveller or just an ordinary stationary individual, such as a policeman on point duty or a commissionaire outside a picture palace. Her offence was that she was married at all.

"He is away just now," said Mrs. Jones unnecessarily.

"Perhaps," said Bill, whose manners in moments of crises were irreproachable, "you would like to walk along the beach?"

"I should very much," said Mrs. Jones demurely, and she came down to him, under the very eyes of Miss Beryl Foster, who knitted even more fiercely, and later made a clacking sound as the landlady appeared in the doorway and beckoned her with the blunt end of a knitting needle.

"It is as I thought," she said, "they are a honeymoon couple!"

"Whatever makes you think so?" said the landlady hopefully.

"They're a honeymoon couple who have quarrelled on their wedding day. She went her way and he went his. It was probably over a question of relations. All my friends quarrel over their relations."

"But——" began Mrs. Carmichael.

"He couldn't bear to have her out of his sight, so he followed," said Miss Foster romantically. "Did you notice how they pretended not to know one another—my dear!"

She twisted her face up into what with a little practice would have been a smile.

"She threw her boot at him as he passed," said Miss Foster startlingly.

"Her boot?" said the incredulous Mrs. Carmichael, "but she only wears shoes."

"Well, shoes or boots, it doesn't matter," rejoined Miss Foster impatiently. "Anyway she dropped her shoe right in front of him, and of course he had to pick it up... they're reconciled."

She pointed, this time with the sharp end of her knitting needle, at the two as they strolled along by the seashore. They were at that moment passing Lover's Rock, so called

because it occurred without excuse in the very middle of a smooth stretch of beach. Lovers might shelter themselves from the gales that blew in those months when no lovers were within a hundred miles. It might as truly have been called Fat Man's Rock. However....

"You see!" said Miss Foster thrillingly. "Now mark my words—oh, drivel and blink!"

With these ladylike curse words did Miss Foster announce the dropping of certain stitches from her too adventurous needle.

And in the meantime.

"I am an artist in the sense that I am not colour-blind," confessed Bill, "otherwise I am sheer false pretence. Fortunately I have a father who is sufficiently fond of his children and well enough off to indulge them in their abnormalities."

"Have you any brothers and sisters?" she asked, interested.

"No," admitted Bill, "I'm the only children. Do you like Ten Pines?"

She shrugged her dainty shoulders.

"I didn't know there was such a place until I came here," she said. "Of course, I could have gone to Newport, but—this is an out-of-the-way place, isn't it?"

Bill nodded gravely.

"You wanted to be alone?" he said gently.

"No, I didn't," she answered; "I'm bored to death. There's an awfully rowdy man sleeps in the next room to me who gets up at unearthly hours and whistles and drops his boots on the floor when he goes to bed. Those kind of people——"

"I am the man next door," interrupted Bill, more gently still. "I hadn't the slightest idea that I was worrying you, Mrs. Jones. There's a woman who lives on the left of me, Number 22, I think, who snores abominably——"

"I live in 22," said the girl icily, "and I don't snore because I don't sleep. I haven't slept a wink since I've been at this place. I'm too worried to sleep and too much of a lady to snore."

Bill agreed.

"When is your husband coming?" he ventured to ask..

He knew he had committed a *faux pas* by the look she gave him.

"Is it necessary to tell about my husband?" she asked frigidly. "He is a subject I never care to discuss."

They walked along in silence for a long time, and Bill, who was not a society man and was not perfectly certain in his mind whether one did discuss husbands with wives, sought vainly in his mind for another and a more pleasing subject. Art he had exhausted in three sentences.

"Who is your father?" she asked suddenly.

"My father," said Bill vaguely. "Oh, he's a man named—named Jones."

"I should have guessed that, but what does he do for a living besides calling himself Jones?"

"He owns some factories—motor-car factories, I believe," said Bill. "I will even go so far as to admit that I know, but the proper pose of the merchant's son is his ignorance of the means by which his parents subsist."

She nodded gravely, and he wondered whether the mention of his father's sordid employment had touched a

chord which brought back to her the memory of her absent husband.

Presently she sighed.

"My father is in rubber."

"You surprise me," said the polite Bill. "I have never had a father in rubber. It must be rather jolly."

Again she eyed him suspiciously.

"Did he recommend you to Ten Pines?" said Bill hastily.

"Ten Pines!" The scorn in her voice. "He's never heard of Ten Pines, and he has not the slightest idea I am here."

A little pause.

"I ran away to get married."

"The devil you did!" said the admiring Bill.

"Yes, I ran away," she replied complacently. "Father wanted me to marry a friend of his—a man in the iron trade, and of course I ran away."

"You did perfectly right," said Bill warmly. "I can imagine nothing more revolting than being married to a man in the iron trade. Did your husband run away with you, that is to say, did he come on first, or did he drop you half-way?"

She stopped and faced him squarely.

"My husband has certain duties to perform, and being a man of honour he is performing them," she said. "He had to give a month's notice to his employer, and naturally I wouldn't hear of him leaving without notice."

She turned and walked back toward the hotel, and Bill paced by her side, his hands behind him, his mind very full of her difficulties.

"Does your father know the chauffeur?" he demanded.

"No." Her reply was very short and uncompromising.