

STEPHEN CRANE

The Fight

I

THE CHILD LIFE of the neighborhood was sometimes moved in its depths at the sight of wagon-loads of furniture arriving in front of some house which with closed blinds and barred doors had been for a time a mystery or even a fear. The boys often expressed this fear by stamping bravely and noisily on the porch of the house and then suddenly darting away with screams of nervous laughter as if they expected to be pursued by something uncanny. There was a group who held that the cellar of a vacant house was certainly the abode of robbers, smugglers, assassins, mysterious masked men in council about the dim rays of a candle and possessing skulls, emblematic bloody daggers, and owls. Then, near the first of April, would come along a wagon-load of furniture and children would assemble on the walk by the gate and make serious examination of everything that passed into the house and taking no thought whatever of masked men.

One day, it was announced in the neighborhood that a family was actually moving into the Hannigan house, next door to Doctor Trescott's. Jimmie was one of the first to be informed and by the time some of his friends came dashing up, he was versed in much.

"Any boys?" they demanded eagerly.

"Yes," answered Jimmie proudly. "One's a little feller and one's 'most as big as me. I saw 'em, I did."

"Where are they?" asked Willie Dalzel as if under the circumstances he could not take Jimmie's word but must have the evidence of his senses.

"Oh, they're in there," said Jimmie carelessly. It was evident he owned these new boys.

Willie Dalzel resented Jimmie's proprietary way. "Ho," he cried scornfully. "Why don't they come out then? Why don't they come out?"

"How'd I know?" said Jimmie.

"Well," retorted Willie Dalzel, "you seemed to know so thundering much about 'em."

At the moment, a boy came strolling down the gravel walk

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert

so you won't miss a single story!

which led from the front door to the gate. He was about the height and age of Jimmie Trescott but he was thick through the chest and had fat legs. His face was round and rosy and plump but his hair was curly black and his brows were naturally darkling so that he resembled both a pudding and a young bull.

He approached slowly the group of older inhabitants and they had grown profoundly silent. They looked him over; he looked them over. They might have been savages observing the first white man or white men observing the first savage. The silence held steady.

As he neared the gate, the strange boy wandered off to the left in a definite way which proved his instinct to make a circular voyage when in doubt. The motionless group stared at him. In time, this unsmiling scrutiny worked upon him somewhat and he leaned against the fence and fastidiously examined one shoe.

In the end, Willie Dalzel authoritatively broke the stillness. "What's your name?" said he gruffly.

"Johnnie Hedge, 'tis," answered the new boy. Then came another great silence while Whilomville pondered this intelligence.

Again came the voice of authority—"Where'd you live b'fore?"

"Jersey City."

These two sentences completed the first section of the formal code. The second section concerned itself with the establishment of the newcomer's exact position in the neighborhood.

"I kin lick you," announced Willie Dalzel and awaited the answer.

The Hedge boy had stared at Willie Dalzel but he stared at him again. After a pause he said: "I know you kin."

"Well," demanded Willie, "kin *he* lick you?" And he indicated Jimmie Trescott with a sweep which announced plainly that Jimmie was the next in prowess.

Whereupon the new boy looked at Jimmie respectfully but carefully and at length said: "I dunno."

This was the signal for an outburst of shrill screaming and everybody pushed Jimmie forward. He knew what he had to

say and as befitted the occasion he said it fiercely. "Kin you lick me?"

The new boy also understood what he had to say and, despite his unhappy and lonely state, he said it bravely. "Yes."

"Well," retorted Jimmie bluntly, "come out and do it then! Jest come out and do it!" And these words were greeted with cheers. These little rascals yelled that there should be a fight at once. They were in bliss over the prospect. "Go on, Jim! Make 'im come out. He said he could lick you! Aw-aw-aw! He said he could lick you!" There probably never was a fight among this class in Whilomville which was not the result of the goading and guying of two proud lads by a populace of urchins who simply wished to see a show.

Willie Dalzel was very busy. He turned first to the one and then to the other. "You said you could lick him. Well, why don't you come out and do it then? You said you could lick him, didn't you?"

"Yes," answered the new boy, dogged and dubious.

Willie tried to drag Jimmie by the arm. "Aw, go on, Jimmie. You ain't afraid, are you?"

"No," said Jimmie.

The two victims opened wide eyes at each other. The fence separated them and so it was impossible for them to immediately engage but they seemed to understand that they were ultimately to be sacrificed to the ferocious aspirations of the other boys and each scanned the other to learn something of his spirit. They were not angry at all. They were merely two little gladiators who were being clamorously told to hurt each other. Each displayed hesitation and doubt without displaying fear. They did not exactly understand what were their feelings and they moodily kicked the ground and made low and sullen answers to Willie Dalzel who worked like a circus-manager.

"Aw, go on, Jim! What's the matter with you? You ain't afraid, are you? Well, then, say something." This sentiment received more cheering from the abandoned little wretches who wished to be entertained and in this cheering there could be heard notes of derision of Jimmie Trescott. The latter had a position to sustain; he was well-known; he often bragged of his willingness and ability to thrash other boys; well, then,

here was a boy of his size who said that he could not thrash him. What was he going to do about it? The crowd made these arguments very clear and repeated them again and again.

Finally Jimmie, driven to aggression, walked close to the fence and said to the new boy, "The first time I catch you out of your own yard, I'll lam the head off'n you." This was received with wild plaudits by the Whilomville urchins.

But the new boy stepped back from the fence. He was awed by Jimmie's formidable mien. But he managed to get out a semi-defiant sentence. "Maybe you will and maybe you won't," said he.

However, his short retreat was taken as a practical victory for Jimmie and the boys hooted him bitterly. He remained inside the fence, swinging one foot and scowling while Jimmie was escorted off down the street amid acclamations. The new boy turned and walked back toward the house, his face gloomy, lined deep with discouragement, as if he felt that the new environment's antagonism and palpable cruelty were sure to prove too much for him.

II

The mother of Johnnie Hedge was a widow and the chief theory of her life was that her boy should be in school on the greatest possible number of days. He himself had no sympathy with this ambition but she detected the truth of his diseases with an unerring eye and he was required to be really ill before he could win the right to disregard the first bell, morning and noon. The chicken-pox and the mumps had given him vacations—vacations of misery, wherein he nearly died between pain and nursing. But bad colds in the head did nothing for him and he was not able to invent a satisfactory hacking cough. His mother was not consistently a tartar. In most things he swayed her to his will. He was allowed to have more jam, pickles and pie than most boys; she respected his profound loathing of Sunday-School; on summer evenings he could remain out of doors until 8.30; but in this matter of school she was inexorable. This single point in her character was of steel.

The Hedges arrived in Whilomville on a Saturday and on the following Monday Johnnie wended his way to school with a note to the principal and his Jersey City school-books. He knew perfectly well that he would be told to buy new and different books but in those days mothers always had an idea that old books would "do" and they invariably sent boys off to a new school with books which would not meet the selected and unchangeable views of the new administration. The old books never would "do." Then the boys brought them home to annoyed mothers and asked for ninety cents or sixty cents or eighty-five cents or some number of cents for another out-fit. In the garret of every house holding a large family there was a collection of effete school-books with Mother rebellious because James could not inherit his books from Paul who should properly be Peter's heir while Peter should be a beneficiary under Henry's will.

But the matter of the books was not the measure of Johnnie Hedge's unhappiness. This whole business of changing schools was a complete torture. Alone, he had to go among a new people, a new tribe, and he apprehended his serious time. There were only two fates for him. One meant victory. One meant a kind of serfdom in which he would subscribe to every word of some superior boy and support his every word. It was not anything like an English system of fagging because boys invariably drifted into the figurative service of other boys whom they devotedly admired and if they were obliged to subscribe to everything, it is true that they would have done so freely in any case. One means to suggest that Johnnie Hedge had to find his place. Willie Dalzel was a type of the little chieftain and Willie was a master but he was not a bully in a special physical sense. He did not drag little boys by the ears until they cried nor make them tearfully fetch and carry for him. They fetched and carried but it was because of their worship of his prowess and genius. And so all through the strata of boy life were chieftains and sub-chieftains and assistant-sub-chieftains. There was no question of little Hedge being towed about by the nose; it was, as one has said, that he had to find his place in a new school. And this in itself was a problem which awed his boyish heart. He was a stranger cast away upon the moon. None knew him, understood him,

felt for him. He would be surrounded for this initiative time by a horde of jackal-creatures who might turn out in the end to be little boys like himself but this last point his philosophy could not understand in its fullness.

He came to a white meeting-house sort of a place in the squat tower of which a great bell was clanging impressively. He passed through an iron gate into a play-ground worn bare as the bed of a mountain brook by the endless runnings and scuffings of little children. There was still a half-hour before the final clangor in the squat tower but the play-ground held a number of frolicsome imps. A loitering boy espied Johnnie Hedge, and he howled: "Oh, oh! Here's a new feller! Here's a new feller!" He advanced upon the strange arrival. "What's your name?" he demanded belligerently, like a particularly offensive custom-house officer.

"Johnnie Hedge," responded the new-comer shyly.

This name struck the other boy as being very comic. All new names strike boys as being comic. He laughed noisily. "Oh, fellers, he says his name is Johnnie Hedge! Haw-haw-haw."

The new boy felt that his name was the most disgraceful thing which had ever been attached to a human being.

"Johnnie Hedge! Haw-haw! What room you in?" said the other lad.

"I dunno," said Johnnie. In the meantime a small flock of interested vultures had gathered about him. The main thing was his absolute strangeness. He even would have welcomed the sight of his tormentors of Saturday; he had seen them before at least. These creatures were only so many incomprehensible problems. He diffidently began to make his way toward the main door of the school and the other boys followed him. They demanded information.

"Are you through subtraction yet? We study jogerfre—did you, ever? You live here now? You goin' to school here now?"

To many questions he made answer as well as the clamor would permit and at length he reached the main door and went quaking unto his new kings. As befitted them, the rabble stopped at the door. A teacher strolling along a corridor found a small boy holding in his hand a note. The boy palpably did not know what to do with the note but the teacher knew and took it. Thereafter this little boy was in harness.

A splendid lady in gorgeous robes gave him a seat at a double desk in the end of which sat a hoodlum with grimy finger-nails who eyed the inauguration with an extreme and personal curiosity. The other desks were gradually occupied by children who first were told of the new boy and then turned upon him a speculative and somewhat derisive eye. The school opened; little classes went forward to a position in front of the teacher's platform and tried to explain that they knew something. The new boy was not requisitioned a great deal; he was allowed to lie dormant until he became used to the scenes and until the teacher found, approximately, his mental position. In the meantime, he suffered a shower of stares and whispers and giggles as if he were a man-ape, whereas he was precisely like other children. From time to time, he made funny and pathetic little overtures to other boys but these overtures could not yet be received; he was not known; he was a foreigner. The village school was like a nation. It was tight. Its amiability or friendship must be won in certain ways.

At recess he hovered in the school-room around the weak lights of society and around the teacher in the hope that somebody might be good to him but none considered him save as some sort of a specimen. The teacher of course had a secondary interest in the fact that he was an additional one to a class of sixty-three.

At twelve o'clock, when the ordered files of boys and girls marched toward the door, he exhibited—to no eye—the tremblings of a coward in a charge. He exaggerated the lawlessness of the play-ground and the street.

But the reality was hard enough. A shout greeted him. "Oh, here's the new feller! Here's the new feller!" Small and utterly obscure boys teased him. He had a hard time of it to get to the gate. There never was any actual hurt but everything was competent to smite the lad with shame; it was a curious, groundless shame but nevertheless it was shame. He was a newcomer and he definitely felt the disgrace of the fact.

In the street he was seen and recognized by some lads who had formed part of the group of Saturday. They shouted: "Oh, Jimmie! Jimmie! Here he is! Here's that new feller!"

Jimmie Trescott was going virtuously toward his luncheon

when he heard these cries behind him. He pretended not to hear and in this deception he was assisted by the fact that he was engaged at the time in a furious argument with a friend over the relative merits of two Uncle Tom's Cabin companies. It appeared that one company had only two blood-hounds while the other had ten. On the other hand, the first company had two Topsy and two Uncle Toms while the second had only one Topsy and one Uncle Tom.

But the shouting little boys were hard after him. Finally they were even pulling at his arms.

"Jimmie—"

"What?" he demanded turning with a snarl. "What d'you want? Leggo my arm."

"Here he is! Here's the new feller! Here's the new feller! Now!"

"I don't care if he is," said Jimmie with grand impatience. He tilted his chin. "I don't care if he is."

Then they reviled him. "Thought you was goin' to lick him first time you caught him. Yah! You're a 'fraid-cat!" They began to sing: "'Fraid-cat! 'Fraid-cat! 'Fraid-cat!" He expostulated hotly, turning from one to the other, but they would not listen. In the meantime the Hedge boy slunk on his way, looking with deep anxiety upon this attempt to send Jimmie against him. But Jimmie would have none of the plan.

III

When the children met again on the play-ground, Jimmie was openly challenged with cowardice. He had made a big threat in the hearing of comrades and when invited by them to take advantage of an opportunity, he had refused. They had been fairly sure of their amusement and they were indignant. Jimmie was finally driven to declare that as soon as school was out for the day, he would thrash the Hedge boy.

When finally the children came rushing out of the iron gate, filled with the delights of freedom, a hundred boys surrounded Jimmie in high spirits for he had said that he was determined. They waited for the lone lad from Jersey City. When he appeared, Jimmie wasted no time. He walked straight to him and said: "Did you say you kin lick me?"

Johnnie Hedge was cowed, shrinking, affrighted, and the roars of a hundred boys thundered in his ears but again he knew what he had to say. "Yes," he gasped in anguish.

"Then," said Jimmie resolutely, "you've got to fight." There was a joyous clamor by the mob. The beleaguered lad looked this way and that way for succor as Willie Dalzel and other officious youngsters policed an irregular circle in the crowd. He saw Jimmie facing him; there was no help for it; he dropped his books—the old books which would not "do."

Now it was the fashion among tiny Whilomville belligerents to fight much in the manner of little bear-cubs. Two boys would rush upon each other, immediately grapple and—the best boy having probably succeeded in getting the coveted "under-hold"—there would presently be a crash to the earth of the inferior boy and he would be probably mopped around in the dust or the mud or the snow or whatever the material happened to be, until the engagement was over. Whatever havoc was dealt out to him was ordinarily the result of his wild endeavors to throw off his opponent and arise. Both infants wept during the fight, as a common thing, and if they wept very hard, the fight was a harder fight. The result was never very bloody but the complete dishevelment of both victor and vanquished was extraordinary. As for the spectacle, it more resembled a collision of boys in a fog than it did the manly art of hammering another human being into speechless inability.

The fight began when Jimmie made a mad bear-cub rush at the new boy amid savage cries of encouragement. Willie Dalzel, for instance, almost howled his head off. Very timid boys on the outskirts of the throng felt their hearts leap to their throats. It was a time when certain natures were impressed that only man is vile.

But it appeared that bear-cub rushing was no part of the instruction received by boys in Jersey City. Boys in Jersey City were apparently schooled curiously. Upon the onslaught of Jimmie, the stranger had gone wild with rage—boy-like. Some spark had touched his fighting blood and in a moment he was a cornered, desperate, fire-eyed little man. He began to swing his arms, to revolve them so swiftly that one might have considered him a small working model of an extra-fine

patented wind-mill which was caught in a gale. For a moment, this defense surprised Jimmie more than it damaged him but, two moments later, a small knotty fist caught him squarely in the eye and with a shriek he went down in defeat. He lay on the ground so stunned that he could not even cry; but if he had been able to cry he would have cried over his prestige—or something—not over his eye.

There was a dreadful tumult. The boys cast glances of amazement and terror upon the victor and thronged upon the beaten Jimmie Trescott. It was a moment of excitement so intense that one cannot say what happened. Never before had Whilomville seen such a thing—not the little tots. They were aghast, dumbfounded, and they glanced often over their shoulders at the new boy who stood alone, his clenched fists at his side, his face crimson, his lips still working with the fury of battle.

But there was another surprise for Whilomville. It might have been seen that the little victor was silently debating against an impulse. But the impulse won, for the lone lad from Jersey City suddenly wheeled, sprang like a demon and struck another boy.

A curtain should be drawn before this deed. A knowledge of it is really too much for the heart to bear. The other boy was Willie Dalzel. The lone lad from Jersey City had smitten him full sore.

There is little to say of it. It must have been that a feeling worked gradually to the top of the little stranger's wrath that Jimmie Trescott had been a mere tool, that the front and centre of his persecutors had been Willie Dalzel, and being rendered temporarily lawless by his fighting blood, he raised his hand and smote for revenge.

Willie Dalzel had been in the middle of a vandal's cry which screeched out over the voices of everybody. The new boy's fist cut it in half, so to say. And then arose the howl of an amazed and terrorized walrus.

One wishes to draw a second curtain. Without discussion, or enquiry or brief retort, Willie Dalzel ran away. He ran like a hare, straight for home, this redoubtable chieftain. Following him at a heavy and slow pace, ran the impassioned new boy. The scene was long remembered.

Willie Dalzel was no coward; he had been panic-stricken into running away from a new thing. He ran as a man might run from the sudden appearance of a vampire or a ghoul or a gorilla. This was no time for academics—he ran.

Jimmie slowly gathered himself and came to his feet. "Where's Willie?" said he first of all. The crowd sniggered. "Where's Willie?" said Jimmie again.

"Why he licked him, *too*," answered a boy suddenly.

"He did?" said Jimmie. He sat weakly down on the roadway. "He did?" After allowing a moment for the fact to sink into him, he looked up at the crowd with his one good eye and his one bunged eye, and smiled cheerfully.