KING BILLY OF BALLARAT

MORLEY ROBERTS

Table of Contents

KING BILLY OF BALLARAT

MORLEY ROBERTS

King Billy was given to strolling up and down the streets of Ballarat when that eviscerated city was merely in process of disembowelment, before alluvial mining gave way to quartz−crushing, when the individual had a chance, if a very vague one, of sudden and delightful fortune. The Ballarat blacks were a scaly lot, to talk of them like ill−fed hogs, as men were wont to do. They dwined and dwindled, as natives will before the resources of civilisation: the bloodthirsty ones got killed out; the rumthirsty ones died out; the wild corroboree was reduced to a poverty−stricken imitation of its former glory. King Billy's authority grew less with the increase of his clothes. The brass plate with his name on it was about the last relic of his precarious power, and was chiefly valued as a means of notifying the public generally that they might stand drinks to a monarch if they saw fit and were not too humble. He was not haughty, and never presumed on his plate, as parvenus will. He came of an ancient stock, and could afford to condescend, even if he could not afford to pay for drinks. He was very kind to children,—white children, of course,—and was hale−fellow−well−met with many of them.

He was particularly fond of Annie Colborn, whose father was a magistrate and a gold commissioner, and a person of very great importance. Whether or not King Billy was wise in his generation, and out of the unwritten Scriptures of the somber bush had culled a maxim inculcating the wisdom of making friends of the sons of Mammon, I cannot say, but he was always good to Annie. For my own part, I do not believe the simple−hearted old king had any such notion inside his thick antipodean skull. He was good because he was not bad, which is the very best morality after all, and a great advance on much we hear of. And, besides, he was sometimes hungry, and Mr. Colborn's Chinese cook was very haughty, and not to be approached except through an intermediary. And who so capable of conciliating Wong as Annie? Wong would make her cakes even when his pigtail hung despondently from his aching head after an opium debauch, and his cheeks were shining with anything but gladness; for if you get drunk very often on opium you shine.

Old Billy was mostly to be found where there was a chance of a drink; but if the fountains were dried up, or he had been insulted by some democratic, revolutionary, king−hating miner knocking his high hat down over his eyes, he usually went up to Mr. Colborn's place, and sat on the fence, or on a log outside the gate. So he was often very melancholy when Annie came out. One day his hat was very, very badly bulged indeed.

"Your hat is very bad to−day, King Billy," said six−year−old Annie, as she stood in front of him critically, with her head on one side. Without knowing it, the child had come to look upon the state of the poor king's hat as emblematical of his state of mind. When it shut up like a closed concertina his barometer was low.

"Yes, missy," said the king; "white man knock 'um over eyes, and"— with a rub down his face—"skin 'um nose."

She inspected his nose carefully—though from a certain distance, because her own nose was very good, both inside and out, and she knew the king never got washed unless it rained when he was very drunk. And this was the end of summer. It had not rained since November.

"There is not very much skin off," said Annie. "You had better wash it."

The king made a wry face and changed the conversation.

"You got 'um hat, Missy Annie? One hat baal brokum, allasame white fellow hat. Bad hat, King Billy bad; black fellow, white fellow laugh."

He peered into his hat, and, trying to straighten it out, put his fist through the side. Poor Billy looked as if he could cry.

"You stop a minute," said Annie, and, flying indoors, she brought out a very good high hat indeed. "Budgeree!" thought the king, that was a good hat. He could go down the streets like a king indeed, able to hold up his head with any rich man in Ballarat. He tried it on, and though it was much too big, he knew it shone. And the glory of a hat is in its shining as much as its shape; even a black fellow knows that.

But that hat very nearly led to serious trouble. For one thing, Mr. Colborn missed it; and never thinking Annie had given it away, when he saw the king sitting on the fence decorated with it, he stopped and interviewed him.

"Where did you get that hat, you old thief?" asked the magistrate, without any politeness to him who ruled the land before white men broke into the country. Some in authority are polite to those they dispossess; the Prussians, for instance, to the miserable King Billys who strut about the empire. But the Anglo−Saxon only respects himself, and even that to a limited extent, in new conquests.

The question troubled King Billy greatly. He did not know that Mr. Colborn would as soon have thought of murdering Annie as of bullying her; so he lied promptly: "Me buy 'um, Mistah Cobon!"

Mr. Colborn took it off of his head, and saw that it was his, as he had thought. What he would have said I do not know, for just then he heard a voice behind him:

"Papa, it is my fault; I gave it to King Billy."

Colborn turned round and took her up, letting fall the hat as he did so. Billy made a jump, picked it up, and, in his agitation, brushed it carefully the wrong way.

"My dear, if you gave it to him it's all right. But why didn't the old fool tell me?"

"He's not an old fool, papa, and you must not say so. He's a good man, and I think he thought you would be angry with me. Didn't you, King Billy?" And the king, with a smile of conscious rectitude, admitted it was so.

Mr. Colborn gave him sixpence; and he gave Annie a great many kisses, declaring, with uncommon thoughtlessness, that whatever she did was right, and that she could give the king all his house, and Australia to boot. Whereon King Billy smiled a smile that was portentous, and showed his teeth to the uttermost recesses of his ample mouth. Looking down, he surveyed the rest of his clothes, which in parts resembled the child's definition of a net as a lot of holes tied together with string, and, looking up, he inspected Mr. Colborn as if estimating the resources of his wardrobe. But being urgently smitten with the necessity of getting rid of his sixpence, he shambled off into the town. Other matters might wait; that admitted of no delay.

The mind of King Billy was not a big mind; it would no more have taken in an abstract idea than his gunyah would have accommodated a grand piano. He was as simple as sunlight, and to resolve his intellect into seven colours would want the most ingenious spectroscope. But he could make an inference from a positive fact, and, having made it, he did not allow more remote deductions to trouble his legitimate conclusion. He ceased to fear Mr. Colborn, and began to look upon the magistrate's property as if it were at least half his own. So he got very drunk on the hospitality of a new chum miner who had been successful, and presently, presuming on his new possessions, got into a fight with his entertainer and a disrespectful subking of his own blacks, and was reduced to worse rags than ever.

Next morning he sat outside the magistrate's house, on the lowest log he could find, and when Mr. Colborn came out he tackled him with the air of a subject king demanding redress of his suzerain.

"Well, Billy, what is it?" asked the suzerain.

"You belong gublement?" said Billy the king, with a question, an implied doubt, and a great complaint in his voice. Colborn laughed.

"Why, yes, Billy; I belong to the government, I suppose."

"Then," said Billy, "what you say to white fellow make 'um black fellow drunk, knock 'um all about? Call you that gublement?" And he showed his kingly robe, which had once been a frock−coat, with great disgust.

However, he met with no favour, and was told that he should not get drunk—that it served him right; with which magisterial decision Colborn got on his horse and rode off to the flat.

The king sat down sadly and considered thickly in his slow brain. Annie did not come out, and he knew better than to ask for her, for Mr. Colborn's niece, who kept house for him, was but newly come from home, and thought all black fellows congenital murderers, which indeed they are in some parts of the north. So Billy sat and waited, for he wanted a new coat. How could he be respected in one whose natural divisions were unnaturally extended to the very neck? It was obviously necessary to get a new garment at once, and the best chance of a good one lay in little Annie's kindness. But in order to obviate the slightest chance of his girl patron's refusing, he must bring her some offering. He went off into the bush at the back of the town, and, coming to where three or four black fellows were camped, he sat down and talked with them. In spite of the heat, a wretched old gin, muffled up in her one garment, a ragged blanket, held her hands over the few burning sticks which represent an Australian native's idea of a fire. Presently King Billy rose, and, taking a tomahawk, went farther into the bush. He looked about, and at last came to a tree, which he climbed native fashion, first discarding his clothes. When near the first big branches he came to a hole, and, putting in his hand, he extracted a lively young possum by the tail.

Next morning he was sitting on the Colborns' fence as usual. At his feet was a little box with two or three slats nailed roughly across it. Inside was the possum. King Billy wondered what kind of a coat he could get. He liked a frock−coat; there was something majestic about it, something fine and ample. Common morning coats would not do; no one would insult a king by offering him tweed; even little Annie knew better than that, especially if he gave her a live possum he had caught himself. And when Annie did come out, she was in the seventh heaven of delight with the possum, and ready to bestow anything in the world on King Billy.

"You give poor Billy one fellow coat, missy, and he go down along street like a king."

Annie flew into the house and seized the first garment she laid her little hands on. It was her father's dress−coat. She rolled it up, and, running out, thrust it excitedly into the king's black paw. As he went off, she carried the possum indoors, and was deliriously happy for hours.

King Billy hurried into the bush till he came to a water−hole, and, stripping off his rags, he held up the coat. His jaw fell; there was a remarkable exiguity about the coat which was inexplicable. He had never observed such in his life. He put it on, and, bending over the surface of the still pool, took a good look at the general effect. It was not bad from some points of view, but Billy had his doubts as to whether he would be received with the respect due to his title if he went into Ballarat clothed thus. He tried to button it, but discovered that, if it had ever been intended for buttoning, he could not get it to meet across his chest. He picked up his discarded frock−coat, which was held together by the collar; then he felt the stuff of which the dress−coat was made, and the material pleased him. "Oh, why," asked Billy, "had it not been made with front tails?" He saw at last that this coat and his high hat alone were insufficient for civilisation. For full dress in a corroboree it might do. Unconsciously, he was so

wrought upon by the purpose for which the coat had been built that he determined to reserve it for parties in the seclusion of the bush, where any merriment could be rightly checked by a crack from his waddy. He planted it carefully in a hollow log, and, having inserted himself with as much care into his discarded rags, he wondered off into the town. He got very intoxicated that night, and determined to have a party all by himself.

Now it may seem very annoying, and I confess I find it so myself; but, having got so far, I don't see my way to tell the rest, even if Annie Colborn told me the story herself. For after her father's death she married a man who had a small sheep−station and a hotel not forty miles from Carabobla, in New South Wales. I stayed there a couple of days when I was going north to the Murrumbidgee. But though she told me, I cannot tell it again, at least not in bold, bad print. Still, it will occur to most that a man of King Billy's sweet and innocent disposition might very likely create a sensation, when his natural discretion was drowned in bad whisky, if he ended his solitary corroboree in the moonlight by going up to Colborn's house in order to deliver a speech of gratitude through the French windows.

So Colborn and the king had a corroboree all to themselves in the open space before the house, while the gold commissioner's guests roared with laughter to find out where the missing dress−coat was. Next day King Billy resumed the split frock−coat.

THY HEART'S DESIRE

BY

NETTA SYRETT

The tents were pitched in the little plain surrounded by hills. Right and left there were stretches of tender, vivid green where the young corn was springing; farther still, on either hand, the plain was yellow with mustard−flower; but in the immediate foreground it was bare and stony. A few thorny bushes pushed their straggling way through the dry soil, ineffectively as far as the grace of the landscape was concerned, for they merely served to emphasise the barren aridness of the land that stretched before the tents, sloping gradually to the distant hills.

The hills were uninteresting enough in themselves; they had no grandeur of outline, no picturesqueness even, though at morning and evening the sun, like a great magician, clothed them with beauty at a touch.

They had begun to change, to soften, to blush rose red in the evening light, when a woman came to the entrance of the largest of the tents and looked toward them. She leaned against the support on one side of the canvas flap, and, putting back her head, rested that, too, against it, while her eyes wandered over the plain and over the distant hills.

She was bareheaded, for the covering of the tent projected a few feet to form an awning overhead. The gentle breeze which had risen with sundown stirred the soft brown tendrils of hair on her temples, and fluttered her pink cotton gown a little. She stood very still, with her arms hanging and her hands clasped loosely in front of her. There was about her whole attitude an air of studied quiet which in some vague fashion the slight clasp of her hands accentuated. Her face, with its tightly, almost rigidly closed lips, would have been quite in keeping with the impression of conscious calm which her entire presence suggested, had it not been that when she raised her eyes a strange contradiction to this idea was afforded. They were large gray eyes, unusually bright and rather startling in effect, for they seemed the only live thing about her. Gleaming from her still, set face, there was something almost alarming in their brilliancy. They softened with a sudden glow of pleasure as they rested on the translucent green of the wheat−fields under the broad generous sunlight, and then wandered to where the pure vivid yellow of the mustard−flower spread in waves to the base of the hills, now mystically veiled in radiance. She stood motionless, watching their melting, elusive changes from palpitating rose to the transparent purple of amethyst. The stillness of evening was broken by the monotonous, not unmusical creaking of a Persian wheel at some little distance to

the left of the tent. The well stood in a little grove of trees; between their branches she could see, when she turned her head, the coloured saris of the village women, where they stood in groups chattering as they drew the water, and the little naked brown babies that toddled beside them or sprawled on the hard ground beneath the trees. From the village of flat−roofed mud houses under the low hill at the back of the tents, other women were crossing the plain toward the well, their terra−cotta water−jars poised easily on their heads, casting long shadows on the sun−baked ground as they came.

Presently, in the distance, from the direction of the sunlit hills opposite a little group of men came into sight. Far off, the mustard− coloured jackets and the red turbans of the orderlies made vivid splashes of colour on the dull plain. As they came nearer, the guns slung across their shoulders, the cases of mathematical instruments, the hammers, and other heavy baggage they carried for the sahib, became visible. A little in front, at walking pace rode the sahib himself, making notes as he came in a book he held before him. The girl at the tent entrance watched the advance of the little company indifferently, it seemed; except for a slight tightening of the muscles about her mouth, her face remained unchanged. While he was still some little distance away, the man with the notebook raised his head and smiled awkwardly as he saw her standing there. Awkwardness, perhaps, best describes the whole man. He was badly put together, loose−jointed, ungainly. The fact that he was tall profited him nothing, for it merely emphasised the extreme ungracefulness of his figure. His long pale face was made paler by the shock of coarse, tow− coloured hair; his eyes, even, looked colourless, though they were certainly the least uninteresting feature of his face, for they were not devoid of expression. He had a way of slouching when he moved that singularly intensified the general uncouthness of his appearance. "Are you very tired?" asked his wife, gently, when he had dismounted close to the tent. The question would have been an unnecessary one had it been put to her instead of to her husband, for her voice had that peculiar flat toneless sound for which extreme weariness is answerable.

"Well, no, my dear, not very," he replied, drawling out the words with an exasperating air of delivering a final verdict, after deep reflection on the subject.

The girl glanced once more at the fading colours on the hills. "Come in and rest," she said, moving aside a little to let him pass.

She stood lingering a moment after he had entered the tent, as though unwilling to leave the outer air; and before she turned to follow him she drew a deep breath, and her hand went for one swift second to her throat as though she felt stifled.

Later on that evening she sat in her tent, sewing by the light of the lamp that stood on her little table.

Opposite to her, her husband stretched his ungainly length in a deck− chair, and turned over a pile of official notes. Every now and then her eyes wandered from the gay silks of the table−cover she was embroidering to the canvas walls which bounded the narrow space into which their few household goods were crowded. Outside there was a deep hush. The silence of the vast empty plain seemed to work its way slowly, steadily in toward the little patch of light set in its midst. The girl felt it in every nerve; it was as though some soft−footed, noiseless, shapeless creature, whose presence she only dimly divined, was approaching nearer—nearer. The heavy outer stillness was in some way made more terrifying by the rustle of the papers her husband was reading, by the creaking of his chair as he moved, and by the little fidgeting grunts and half−exclamations which from time to time broke from him. His wife's hand shook at every unintelligible mutter from him, and the slight habitual contraction between her eyes deepened.

All at once she threw her work down on to the table. "For heaven's sake—please, John, talk!" she cried. Her eyes, for the moment's space in which they met the startled ones of her husband, had a wild, hunted look, but it was gone almost before his slow brain had time to note that it had been there—and was vaguely disturbing. She laughed a little unsteadily.

"Did I startle you? I'm sorry. I"—she laughed again—"I believe I'm a little nervous. When one is all day alone—" She paused without finishing the sentence. The man's face changed suddenly. A wave of tenderness swept over it, and at the same time an expression of half− incredulous delight shone in his pale eyes.

"Poor little girl, are you really lonely?" he said. Even the real feeling in his tone failed to rob his voice of its peculiarly irritating grating quality. He rose awkwardly, and moved to his wife's side.

Involuntarily she shrank a little, and the hand which he had stretched out to touch her hair sank to his side. She recovered herself immediately, and turned her face up to his, though she did not raise her eyes; but he did not kiss her. Instead, he stood in an embarrassed fashion a moment by her side, and then went back to his seat.

There was silence again for some time. The man lay back in his chair, gazing at his big, clumsy shoes as though he hoped for some inspiration from that quarter, while his wife worked with nervous haste.

"Don't let me keep you from reading, John," she said, and her voice had regained its usual gentle tone.

"No, my dear; I'm just thinking of something to say to you, but I don't seem—"

She smiled a little. In spite of herself, her lip curled faintly. "Don't worry about it; it was stupid of me to expect it. I mean—" she added, hastily, immediately repenting the sarcasm. She glanced furtively at him, but his face was quite unmoved; evidently he had not noticed it, and she smiled faintly again.

"O Kathie, I knew there was something I'd forgotten to tell you, my dear; there's a man coming down here. I don't know whether—"

She looked up sharply. "A man coming here? What for?" she interrupted, breathlessly.

"Sent to help me about this oil−boring business, my dear."

He had lighted his pipe, and was smoking placidly, taking long whiffs between his words.

"Well?" impatiently questioned his wife, fixing her bright eyes on his face.

"Well—that's all, my dear."

She checked an exclamation. "But don't you know anything about him— his name? where he comes from? what he is like?" She was leaning forward against the table, her needle, with a long end of yellow silk drawn half−way through her work, held in her upraised hand, her whole attitude one of quivering excitement and expectancy.

The man took his pipe from his mouth deliberately, with a look of slow wonder.

"Why, Kathie, you seem quite anxious. I didn't know you'd be so interested, my dear. Well,"—another long pull at his pipe,—"his name's Brook—Brookfield, I think." He paused again. "This pipe doesn't draw well a bit; there's something wrong with it, I shouldn't wonder," he added, taking it out and examining the bowl as though struck with the brilliance of the idea.

The woman opposite put down her work and clinched her hands under the table.

"Go on, John," she said, presently, in a tense, vibrating voice; "his name is Brookfield. Well, where does he come from?"

"Straight from home, my dear, I believe." He fumbled in his pocket, and after some time extricated a pencil, with which he began to poke the tobacco in the bowl in an ineffectual aimless fashion, becoming completely engrossed in the occupation apparently. There was another long pause. The woman went on working, or feigning to work, for her hands were trembling a good deal.

After some moments she raised her head again. "John, will you mind attending to me one moment, and answering these questions as quickly as you can?" The emphasis on the last word was so faint as to be almost as imperceptible as the touch of exasperated contempt which she could not absolutely banish from her tone.

Her husband, looking up, met her clear bright gaze, and reddened like a school−boy.

"Whereabouts 'from home' does he come?" she asked, in a studiedly gentle fashion.

"Well, from London, I think," he replied, almost briskly for him, though he stammered and tripped over the words. "He's a university chap; I used to hear he was clever; I don't know about that, I'm sure; he used to chaff me, I remember, but—"

"Chaff you? You have met him then?"

"Yes, my dear,"—he was fast relapsing into his slow drawl again,— "that is, I went to school with him; but it's a long time ago. Brookfield—yes, that must be his name."

She waited a moment; then, "When is he coming?" she inquired, abruptly.

"Let me see—to−day's—"

"Monday;" the word came swiftly between her set teeth.

"Ah, yes—Monday; well," reflectively, "next Monday, my dear."

Mrs. Drayton rose, and began to pace softly the narrow passage between the table and the tent wall, her hands clasped loosely behind her.

"How long have you known this?" she said, stopping abruptly. "O John, you needn't consider; it's quite a simple question. To−day? Yesterday?

Her foot moved restlessly on the ground as she waited.

"I think it was the day before yesterday," he replied.

"Then why, in heaven's name, didn't you tell me before?" she broke out, fiercely.

"My dear, it slipped my memory. If I'd thought you would be interested—"

"Interested!" She laughed shortly. "It is rather interesting to hear that after six months of this"—she made a quick comprehensive gesture with her hand—"one will have some one to speak to—some one. It is the hand of Providence; it comes just in time to save me from—" She checked herself abruptly.

He sat staring up at her stupidly, without a word.

"It's all right, John," she said, with a quick change of tone, gathering up her work quietly as she spoke. "I'm not mad—yet. You— you must get used to these little outbreaks," she added, after a moment, smiling faintly; "and, to do me justice, I don't often trouble you with them, do I? I'm just a little tired, or it's the heat or—something. No—don't touch me!" she cried, shrinking back; for he had risen slowly and was coming toward her.

She had lost command over her voice, and the shrill note of horror in it was unmistakable. The man heard it, and shrank in his turn.

"I'm so sorry, John," she murmured, raising her great bright eyes to his face. They had not lost their goaded expression, though they were full of tears. "I'm awfully sorry; but I'm just nervous and stupid, and I can't bear any one to touch me when I'm nervous."

"Here's Broomhurst, my dear! I made a mistake in his name after all, I find. I told you Brookfield, I believe, didn't I? Well, it isn't Brookfield, he says; it's Broomhurst."

Mrs. Drayton had walked some little distance across the plain to meet and welcome the expected guest. She stood quietly waiting while her husband stammered over his incoherent sentences, and then put out her hand.

"We are very glad to see you," she said, with a quick glance at the new−comer's face as she spoke.

As they walked together toward the tent, after the first greetings, she felt his keen eyes upon her before he turned to her husband.

"I'm afraid Mrs. Drayton finds the climate trying?" he asked. "Perhaps she ought not to have come so far in this heat?"

"Kathie is often pale. You do look white to−day, my dear," he observed, turning anxiously toward his wife.

"Do I?" she replied. The unsteadiness of her tone was hardly appreciable, but it was not lost on Broomhurst's quick ears. "Oh, I don't think so. I feel very well."

"I'll come and see if they've fixed you up all right," said Drayton, following his companion toward the new tent that had been pitched at some little distance from the large one.

"We shall see you at dinner then?" Mrs. Drayton observed in reply to Broomhurst's smile as they parted.

She entered the tent slowly, and, moving up to the table already laid for dinner, began to rearrange the things upon it in a purposeless, mechanical fashion.

After a moment she sank down upon a seat opposite the open entrance, and put her hand to her head.

"What is the matter with me?" she thought, wearily. "All the week I've been looking forward to seeing this man—any man, any one to take off the edge of this." She shuddered. Even in thought she hesitated to analyse the feeling that possessed her. "Well, he's here, and I think I feel worse." Her eyes travelled toward the hills she had been used to watch at this hour, and rested on them with a vague, unseeing gaze.

"Tired Kathie? A penny for your thoughts, my dear," said her husband, coming in presently to find her still sitting there.

"I'm thinking what a curious world this is, and what an ironical vein of humour the gods who look after it must possess," she replied, with a mirthless laugh, rising as she spoke.

John looked puzzled.

"Funny my having known Broomhurst before, you mean?" he said doubtfully.

"I was fishing down at Lynmouth this time last year," Broomhurst said at dinner. "You know Lynmouth, Mrs. Drayton? Do you never imagine you hear the gurgling of the stream? I am tantalised already by the sound of it rushing through the beautiful green gloom of those woods— aren't they lovely? And I haven't been in this burnt−up spot as many hours as you've had months of it."

She smiled a little.

"You must learn to possess your soul in patience," she said, and glanced inconsequently from Broomhurst to her husband, and then dropped her eyes and was silent a moment.

John was obviously, and a little audibly, enjoying his dinner. He sat with his chair pushed close to the table, and his elbows awkwardly raised, swallowing his soup in gulps. He grasped his spoon tightly in his bony hand, so that its swollen joints stood out larger and uglier than ever, his wife thought.

Her eyes wandered to Broomhurst's hands. They were well shaped, and, though not small, there was a look of refinement about them; he had a way of touching things delicately, a little lingeringly, she noticed. There was an air of distinction about his clear−cut, clean−shaven face, possibly intensified by contrast with Drayton's blurred features; and it was, perhaps, also by contrast with the gray cuffs that showed beneath John's ill−cut drab suit that the linen Broomhurst wore seemed to her particularly spotless.

Broomhurst's thoughts, for his part, were a good deal occupied with his hostess.

She was pretty, he thought, or perhaps it was that, with the wide, dry lonely plain as a setting, her fragile delicacy of appearance was invested with a certain flower−like charm.

"The silence here seems rather strange, rather appalling at first, when one is fresh from a town," he pursued, after a moment's pause; "but I suppose you're used to it, eh, Drayton? How do you find life here, Mrs. Drayton?" he asked, a little curiously, turning to her as he spoke.

She hesitated a second. "Oh, much the same as I should find it anywhere else, I expect," she replied; "after all, one carries the possibilities of a happy life about with one; don't you think so? The Garden of Eden wouldn't necessarily make my life any happier, or less happy, than a howling wilderness like this. It depends on one's self entirely."

"Given the right Adam and Eve, the desert blossoms like the rose, in fact," Broomhurst answered, lightly, with a smiling glance inclusive of husband and wife; "you two don't feel as though you'd been driven out of Paradise, evidently."

Drayton raised his eyes from his plate with a smile of total incomprehension.

"Great heavens! what an Adam to select!" thought Broomhurst, involuntarily, as Mrs. Drayton rose rather suddenly from the table.

"I'll come and help with that packing−case," John said, rising, in his turn, lumberingly from his place; "then we can have a smoke—eh! Kathie don't mind, if we sit near the entrance.

The two men went out together, Broomhurst holding the lantern, for the moon had not yet risen. Mrs. Drayton followed them to the doorway, and, pushing the looped−up hanging farther aside, stepped out into the cool darkness.

Her heart was beating quickly, and there was a great lump in her throat that frightened her as though she were choking.

"And I am his wife—I belong to him!" she cried, almost aloud.

She pressed both her hands tightly against her breast, and set her teeth, fighting to keep down the rising flood that threatened to sweep away her composure. "Oh, what a fool I am! What an hysterical fool of a woman I am!" she whispered below her breath. She began to walk slowly up and down outside the tent, in the space illumined by the lamplight, as though striving to make her outwardly quiet movements react upon the inward tumult. In a little while she had conquered; she quietly entered the tent, drew a low chair to the entrance, and took up a book, just as footsteps became audible. A moment afterward Broomhurst emerged from the darkness into the circle of light outside, and Mrs. Drayton raised her eyes from the pages she was turning to greet him with a smile.

"Are your things all right?"

"Oh, yes, more or less, thank you. I was a little concerned about a case of books, but it isn't much damaged fortunately. Perhaps I've some you would care to look at?"

"The books will be a godsend," she returned, with a sudden brightening of the eyes; "I was getting desperate—for books."

"What are you reading now?" he asked, glancing at the volume that lay in her lap.

"It's a Browning. I carry it about a good deal. I think I like to have it with me, but I don't seem to read it much."

"Are you waiting for a suitable optimistic moment?" Broomhurst inquired, smiling.

"Yes, now that you mention it, I think that must be why I am waiting," she replied, slowly.

"And it doesn't come—even in the Garden of Eden? Surely the serpent, pessimism, hasn't been insolent enough to draw you into conversation with him?" he said, lightly.

"There has been no one to converse with at all—when John is away, I mean. I think I should have liked a little chat with the serpent immensely by way of a change," she replied, in the same tone.

"Ah, yes," Broomhurst said, with sudden seriousness; "it must be unbearably dull for you alone here, with Drayton away all day."

Mrs. Drayton's hand shook a little as she fluttered a page of her open book.

"I should think it quite natural you would be irritated beyond endurance to hear that all's right with the world, for instance, when you were sighing for the long day to pass," he continued.

"I don't mind the day so much; it's the evenings." She abruptly checked the swift words, and flushed painfully. "I mean—I've grown stupidly nervous, I think—even when John is here. Oh, you have no idea of the awful silence of this place at night," she added, rising hurriedly from her low seat, and moving closer to the doorway. "It is so close, isn't it?" she said, almost apologetically. There was silence for quite a minute.

Broomhurst's quick eyes noted the silent momentary clinching of the hands that hung at her side, as she stood leaning against the support at the entrance.

"But how stupid of me to give you such a bad impression of the camp— the first evening, too!" Mrs. Drayton exclaimed, presently; and her companion mentally commended the admirable composure of her voice.

"Probably you will never notice that it is lonely at all," she continued; "John likes it here. He is immensely interested in his work, you know. I hope you are too. If you are interested it is all quite right. I think the climate tries me a little. I never used to be stupid—and nervous. Ah, here's John; he's been round to the kitchen tent, I suppose."

"Been looking after that fellow cleanin' my gun, my dear," John explained, shambling toward the deck−chair.

Later Broomhurst stood at his own tent door. He looked up at the star− sown sky, and the heavy silence seemed to press upon him like an actual, physical burden.

He took his cigar from between his lips presently, and looked at the glowing end reflectively before throwing it away.

"Considering that she has been alone with him here for six months, she has herself very well in hand—very well in hand," he repeated.

It was Sunday morning. John Drayton sat just inside the tent, presumably enjoying his pipe before the heat of the day. His eyes furtively followed his wife as she moved about near him, sometimes passing close to his chair in search of something she had mislaid. There was colour in her cheeks; her eyes, though preoccupied, were bright; there was a lightness and buoyancy in her step which she set to a little dancing air she was humming under her breath.

After a moment or two the song ceased; she began to move slowly, sedately; and, as if chilled by a raw breath of air, the light faded from her eyes, which she presently turned toward her husband.

"Why do you look at me?" she asked, suddenly.

"I don't know, my dear," he began slowly and laboriously, as was his wont. "I was thinkin' how nice you looked—jest now—much better, you know; but somehow,"—he was taking long whiffs at his pipe, as usual, between each word, while she stood patiently waiting for him to finish,—"somehow, you alter so, my dear—you're quite pale again, all of a minute."

She stood listening to him, noticing against her will the more than suspicion of cockney accent and the thick drawl with which the words were uttered.

His eyes sought her face piteously. She noticed that too, and stood before him torn by conflicting emotions, pity and disgust struggling in a hand−to−hand fight within her.

"Mr. Broomhurst and I are going down by the well to sit; it's cooler there. Won't you come?" she said at last, gently.

He did not reply for a moment; then he turned his head aside, sharply for him.

"No, my dear, thank you; I'm comfortable enough here," he returned, huskily.

She stood over him, hesitating a second; then moved abruptly to the table, from which she took a book.

He had risen from his seat by the time she turned to go out, and he intercepted her timorously.

"Kathie, give me a kiss before you go," he whispered, hoarsely. "I—I don't often bother you."

She drew her breath in deeply as he put his arms clumsily about her; but she stood still, and he kissed her on the forehead, and touched the little wavy curls that strayed across it gently with his big, trembling fingers.

When he released her, she moved at once impetuously to the open doorway. On the threshold she hesitated, paused a moment irresolutely, and then turned back.

"Shall I—does your pipe want filling, John?" she asked, softly.

"No, thank you, my dear."

"Would you like me to stay, read to you, or anything?"

He looked up at her wistfully. "N−no, thank you; I'm not much of a reader, you know, my dear—somehow."

She hated herself for knowing that there would be a "my dear," probably a "somehow," in his reply, and despised herself for the sense of irritated impatience she felt by anticipation, even before the words were uttered.

There was a moment's hesitating silence, broken by the sound of quick, firm footsteps without. Broomhurst paused at the entrance, and looked into the tent.

"Aren't you coming, Drayton?" he asked, looking first at Drayton's wife and then swiftly putting in his name with a scarcely perceptible pause. "Too lazy? But you, Mrs. Drayton?"

"Yes, I'm coming," she said.

They left the tent together, and walked some few steps in silence.

Broomhurst shot a quick glance at his companion's face.

"Anything wrong?" he asked, presently.

Though the words were ordinary enough, the voice in which they were spoken was in some subtle fashion a different voice from that in which he had talked to her nearly two months ago, though it would have required a keen sense of nice shades in sound to have detected the change.

Mrs. Drayton's sense of niceties in sound was particularly keen, but she answered quietly, "Nothing, thank you."

They did not speak again till the trees round the stone well were reached.

Broomhurst arranged their seats comfortably beside it.

"Are we going to read or talk?" he asked, looking up at her from his lower place.

"Well, we generally talk most when we arrange to read; so shall we agree to talk to−day for a change, by way of getting some reading done?" she rejoined, smiling. "You begin."

Broomhurst seemed in no hurry to avail himself of the permission; he was apparently engrossed in watching the flecks of sunshine on Mrs. Drayton's white dress. The whirring of insects, and the creaking of a Persian wheel somewhere in the neighbourhood, filtered through the hot silence.

Mrs. Drayton laughed after a few minutes; there was a touch of embarrassment in the sound.

"The new plan doesn't answer. Suppose you read, as usual, and let me interrupt, also as usual, after the first two lines."

He opened the book obediently, but turned the pages at random.

She watched him for a moment, and then bent a little forward toward him.

"It is my turn now," she said, suddenly; "is anything wrong?"

He raised his head, and their eyes met. There was a pause. "I will be more honest than you," he returned; "yes, there is."

"What?"

"I've had orders to move on."

She drew back, and her lips whitened, though she kept them steady.

"When do you go?"

"On Wednesday."

There was silence again; the man still kept his eyes on her face.

The whirring of the insects and the creaking of the wheel had suddenly grown so strangely loud and insistent that it was in a half−dazed fashion she at length heard her name—"Kathleen!"

"Kathleen!" he whispered again, hoarsely.

She looked him full in the face, and once more their eyes met in a long, grave gaze.

The man's face flushed, and he half rose from his seat with an impetuous movement; but Kathleen stopped him with a glance.

"Will you go and fetch my work? I left it in the tent," she said, speaking very clearly and distinctly; "and then will you go on reading? I will find the place while you are gone."

She took the book from his hand, and he rose and stood before her.

There was a mute appeal in his silence, and she raised her head slowly.

Her face was white to the lips, but she looked at him unflinchingly; and without a word he turned and left her.

Mrs. Drayton was resting in the tent on Tuesday afternoon. With the help of cushions and some low chairs, she had improvised a couch, on which she lay quietly with her eyes closed. There was a tenseness, however, in her

attitude which indicated that sleep was far from her.

Her features seemed to have sharpened during the last few days, and there were hollows in her cheeks. She had been very ill for a long time, but all at once, with a sudden movement, she turned her head and buried her face in the cushions with a groan. Slipping from her place, she fell on her knees beside the couch, and put both hands before her mouth to force back the cry that she felt struggling to her lips.

For some moments the wild effort she was making for outward calm, which even when she was alone was her first instinct, strained every nerve and blotted out sight and hearing, and it was not till the sound was very near that she was conscious of the ring of horse's hoofs on the plain.

She raised her head sharply, with a thrill of fear, still kneeling, and listened.

There was no mistake. The horseman was riding in hot haste, for the thud of the hoofs followed one another swiftly.

As Mrs. Drayton listened her white face grew whiter, and she began to tremble. Putting out shaking hands, she raised herself by the arms of the folding−chair and stood upright.

Nearer and nearer came the thunder of the approaching sound, mingled with startled exclamations and the noise of trampling feet from the direction of the kitchen tent.

Slowly, mechanically almost, she dragged herself to the entrance, and stood clinging to the canvas there. By the time she had reached it Broomhurst had flung himself from the saddle, and had thrown the reins to one of the men.

Mrs. Drayton stared at him with wide, bright eyes as he hastened toward her.

"I thought you—you are not—" she began, and then her teeth began to chatter. "I am so cold!" she said, in a little, weak voice.

Broomhurst took her hand and led her over the threshold back into the tent.

"Don't be so frightened," he implored; "I came to tell you first. I thought it wouldn't frighten you so much as—Your—Drayton is—very ill. They are bringing him. I—"

He paused. She gazed at him a moment with parted lips; then she broke into a horrible, discordant laugh, and stood clinging to the back of a chair.

Broomhurst started back.

"Do you understand what I mean?" he whispered. "Kathleen, for God's sake—don't—he is dead."

He looked over his shoulder as he spoke, her shrill laughter ringing in his ears. The white glare and dazzle of the plain stretched before him, framed by the entrance to the tent; far off, against the horizon, there were moving black specks, which he knew to be the returning servants with their still burden.

They were bringing John Drayton home.

One afternoon, some months later, Broomhurst climbed the steep lane leading to the cliffs of a little English village by the sea. He had already been to the inn, and had been shown by the proprietress the house where Mrs.

Drayton lodged.

"The lady was out, but the gentleman would likely find her if he went to the cliffs—down by the bay, or thereabouts," her landlady explained; and, obeying her directions, Broomhurst presently emerged from the shady woodland path on to the hillside overhanging the sea.

He glanced eagerly round him, and then, with a sudden quickening of the heart, walked on over the springy heather to where she sat. She turned when the rustling his footsteps made through the bracken was near enough to arrest her attention, and looked up at him as he came. Then she rose slowly and stood waiting for him. He came up to her without a word, and seized both her hands, devouring her face with his eyes. Something he saw there repelled him. Slowly he let her hands fall, still looking at her silently. "You are not glad to see me, and I have counted the hours," he said, at last, in a dull, toneless voice.

Her lips quivered. "Don't be angry with me—I can't help it—I'm not glad or sorry for anything now," she answered; and her voice matched his for grayness.

They sat down together on a long flat stone half embedded in a wiry clump of whortleberries. Behind them the lonely hillsides rose, brilliant with yellow bracken and the purple of heather. Before them stretched the wide sea. It was a soft, gray day. Streaks of pale sunlight trembled at moments far out on the water. The tide was rising in the little bay above which they sat, and Broomhurst watched the lazy foam−edged waves slipping over the uncovered rocks toward the shore, then sliding back as though for very weariness they despaired of reaching it. The muffled, pulsing sound of the sea filled the silence. Broomhurst thought suddenly of hot Eastern sunshine, of the whir of insect wings on the still air, and the creaking of a wheel in the distance. He turned and looked at his companion.

"I have come thousands of miles to see you," he said; "aren't you going to speak to me now I am here?"

"Why did you come? I told you not to come," she answered, falteringly. "I—" she paused.

"And I replied that I should follow you—if you remember," he answered, still quietly. "I came because I would not listen to what you said then, at that awful time. You didn't know yourself what you said. No wonder! I have given you some months, and now I have come."

There was silence between them. Broomhurst saw that she was crying; her tears fell fast on to her hands, that were clasped in her lap. Her face, he noticed, was thin and drawn.

Very gently he put his arm round her shoulder and drew her nearer to him. She made no resistance; it seemed that she did not notice the movement; and his arm dropped at his side.

"You asked me why I had come. You think it possible that three months can change one very thoroughly, then?" he said, in a cold voice.

"I not only think it possible; I have proved it," she replied, wearily.

He turned round and faced her.

"You did love me, Kathleen!" he asserted. "You never said so in words, but I know it," he added, fiercely.

"Yes, I did."

"And—you mean that you don't now?"

Her voice was very tired. "Yes; I can't help it," she answered; "it has gone—utterly."

The gray sea slowly lapped the rocks. Overhead the sharp scream of a gull cut through the stillness. It was broken again, a moment afterward, by a short hard laugh from the man.

"Don't!" she whispered, and laid a hand swiftly on his arm. "Do you think it isn't worse for me? I wish to God I did love you!" she cried, passionately. "Perhaps it would make me forget that, to all intents and purposes, I am a murderess.

Broomhurst met her wide, despairing eyes with an amazement which yielded to sudden pitying comprehension.

"So that is it, my darling? You are worrying about that? You who were as loyal as—"

She stopped him with a frantic gesture.

"Don't! don't!" she wailed. "If you only knew! Let me try to tell you—will you?" she urged, pitifully. "It may be better if I tell some one—if I don't keep it all to myself, and think, and think."

She clasped her hands tight, with the old gesture he remembered when she was struggling for self−control, and waited a moment.

Presently she began to speak in a low, hurried tone: "It began before you came. I know now what the feeling was that I was afraid to acknowledge to myself. I used to try and smother it; I used to repeat things to myself all day—poems, stupid rhymes—anything to keep my thoughts quite underneath—but I—hated John before you came! We had been married nearly a year then. I never loved him. Of course you are going to say, 'Why did you marry him?' " She looked drearily over the placid sea. "Why did I marry him? I don't know; for the reason that hundreds of ignorant, inexperienced girls marry, I suppose. My home wasn't a happy one. I was miserable, and oh—restless. I wonder if men know what it feels like to be restless? Sometimes I think they can't even guess. John wanted me very badly; nobody wanted me at home particularly. There didn't seem to be any point in my life. Do you understand? . . . Of course, being alone with him in that little camp in that silent plain"—she shuddered—"made things worse. My nerves went all to pieces. Everything he said, his voice, his accent, his walk, the way he ate, irritated me so that I longed to rush out sometimes and shriek—and go mad. Does it sound ridiculous to you to be driven mad by such trifles? I only know I used to get up from the table sometimes and walk up and down outside, with both hands over my mouth to keep myself quiet. And all the time I hated myself—how I hated myself! I never had a word from him that wasn't gentle and tender. I believe he loved the ground I walked on. Oh, it is awful to be loved like that when you—" She drew in her breath with a sob. "I—I—it made me sick for him to come near me—to touch me." She stopped a moment.

Broomhurst gently laid his hand on her quivering one. "Poor little girl!" he murmured.

"Then you came," she said, "and before long I had another feeling to fight against. At first I thought it couldn't be true that I loved you —it would die down. I think I was frightened at the feeling; I didn't know it hurt so to love any one."

Broomhurst stirred a little. "Go on," he said, tersely.

"But it didn't die," she continued, in a trembling whisper, "and the other awful feeling grew stronger and stronger—hatred; no, that is not the word—loathing for—for—John. I fought against it. Yes," she cried, feverishly, clasping and unclasping her hands; "Heaven knows I fought it with all my strength, and reasoned with myself, and —oh, I did everything, but—" Her quick−falling tears made speech difficult.

"Kathleen!" Broomhurst urged, desperately, "you couldn't help it, you poor child. You say yourself you struggled against your feelings. You were always gentle; perhaps he didn't know."

"But he did—he did," she wailed; "it is just that. I hurt him a hundred times a day; he never said so, but I knew it; and yet I couldn't be kind to him,—except in words,—and he understood. And after you came it was worse in one way, for he knew—I felt he knew —that I loved you. His eyes used to follow me like a dog's, and I was stabbed with remorse, and I tried to be good to him, but I couldn't."

"But—he didn't suspect—he trusted you," began Broomhurst. "He had every reason. No woman was ever so loyal, so—"

"Hush!" she almost screamed. "Loyal! it was the least I could do—to stop you, I mean—when you—After all, I knew it without your telling me. I had deliberately married him without loving him. It was my own fault. I felt it. Even if I couldn't prevent his knowing that I hated him, I could prevent that. It was my punishment. I deserved it for daring to marry without love. But I didn't spare John one pang after all," she added, bitterly. "He knew what I felt toward him; I don't think he cared about anything else. You say I mustn't reproach myself? When I went back to the tent that morning—when you—when I stopped you from saying you loved me, he was sitting at the table with his head buried in his hands; he was crying—bitterly. I saw him,—it is terrible to see a man cry,—and I stole away gently, but he saw me. I was torn to pieces, but I couldn't go to him. I knew he would kiss me, and I shuddered to think of it. It seemed more than ever not to be borne that he should do that—when I knew you loved me."

"Kathleen," cried her lover, again, "don't dwell on it all so terribly —don't—"

"How can I forget?" she answered, despairingly. "And then,"—she lowered her voice,—"oh, I can't tell you—all the time, at the back of my mind somewhere, there was a burning wish that he might die. I used to lie awake at night, and, do what I would to stifle it, that thought used to scorch me, I wished it so intensely. Do you believe that by willing one can bring such things to pass?" she asked, looking at Broomhurst with feverishly bright eyes. "No? Well, I don't know. I tried to smother it,—I really tried,—but it was there, whatever other thoughts I heaped on the top. Then, when I heard the horse galloping across the plain that morning, I had a sick fear that it was you. I knew something had happened, and my first thought when I saw you alive and well, and knew it was John, was that it was too good to be true. I believe I laughed like a maniac, didn't I? . . . Not to blame? Why, if it hadn't been for me he wouldn't have died. The men say they saw him sitting with his head uncovered in the burning sun, his face buried in his hands—just as I had seen him the day before. He didn't trouble to be careful; he was too wretched."

She paused, and Broomhurst rose and began to pace the little hillside path at the edge of which they were seated.

Presently he came back to her.

"Kathleen, let me take care of you," he implored, stooping toward her. "We have only ourselves to consider in this matter. Will you come to me at once?"

She shook her head sadly.

Broomhurst set his teeth, and the lines round his mouth deepened. He threw himself down beside her on the heather.

"Dear," he urged, still gently, though his voice showed he was controlling himself with an effort, "you are morbid about this. You have been alone too much; you are ill. Let me take care of you; I can, Kathleen,—and I love you. Nothing but morbid fancy makes you imagine you are in any way responsible for—Drayton's death. You can't

bring him back to life, and—"

"No," she sighed, drearily, "and if I could, nothing would be altered. Though I am mad with self−reproach, I feel that—it was all so inevitable. If he were alive and well before me this instant, my feeling toward him wouldn't have changed. If he spoke to me he would say 'my dear'—and I should loathe him. Oh, I know! It is that that makes it so awful."

"But if you acknowledge it," Broomhurst struck in, eagerly, "will you wreck both of our lives for the sake of vain regrets? Kathleen, you never will."

He waited breathlessly for her answer.

"I won't wreck both our lives by marrying again without love on my side," she replied, firmly.

"I will take the risk," he said. "You have loved me; you will love me again. You are crushed and dazed now with brooding over this—this trouble, but—"

"But I will not allow you to take the risk," Kathleen answered. "What sort of woman should I be to be willing again to live with a man I don't love? I have come to know that there are things one owes to one's self. Self−respect is one of them. I don't know how it has come to be so, but all my old feeling for you has gone. It is as though it had burned itself out. I will not offer gray ashes to any man."

Broomhurst, looking up at her pale, set face, knew that her words were final, and turned his own aside with a groan.

"Ah," cried Kathleen, with a little break in her voice, "don't! Go away, and be happy and strong, and all that I loved in you. I am so sorry—so sorry to hurt you. I—" her voice faltered miserably; "I—I only bring trouble to people."

There was a long pause.

"Did you never think that there is a terrible vein of irony running through the ordering of this world?" she said, presently. "It is a mistake to think our prayers are not answered—they are. In due time we get our heart's desire—when we have ceased to care for it."

"I haven't yet got mine," Broomhurst answered, doggedly, "and I shall never cease to care for it."

She smiled a little, with infinite sadness.

"Listen, Kathleen," he said. They had both risen, and he stood before her, looking down at her. "I will go now, but in a year's time I shall come back. I will not give you up. You shall love me yet."

"Perhaps—I don't think so," she answered, wearily.

Broomhurst looked at her trembling lips a moment in silence; then he stooped and kissed both her hands instead.

"I will wait till you tell me you love me," he said.

She stood watching him out of sight. He did not look back, and she turned with swimming eyes to the gray sea and the transient gleams of sunlight that swept like tender smiles across its face.