

KING BILLY WAS REPENTANT

A Story of a Black Man's Gratitude.

After Stealing Effie's Gold Nugget He Was Returning it When Killed for a Robber.

John Archer decided that the nugget would be safer in his little daughter's keeping than in his own.

"You must take care of it, darling," said John Archer. "It is for your mother."

And Effie stowed the little nugget away in a corner of the old workbox which had been her mother's under the cotton and socks she was darning for her father.

She felt duly weighted with the responsibility. She knew that this yellow earth was of great value, for her father, leaving her mother, who was very delicate, with some friends in Brisbane, had come a long, weary way to find it.

Having hidden the little nugget away, Effie came out of the hut to look around and see if any one was near who might have seen her.

No one was near who might have seen her only Billy, the black—King Billy, the aboriginal monarch, who loved rum and tobacco and who was chopping some fire wood for her.

This little girl's reason for trusting King Billy, the black, was somewhat strange and is worthy of being recorded. She trusted him because she had been kind to him.

But Effie was only 12. As the child stood in the broad light, her tumbled hair hued hair kissed and illumined by the bold rays of the sun and her round, trustful blue eyes shaded from the glare by two little brown hands, watching King Billy at his work, a flock of laughing jackasses alighted in a neighborhood gum tree and set up a demoniac cackling.

What made the ill omened birds so madly merry? What was the joke? Effie's trust? Billy's gratitude? They failed to explain, but their amusement was huge and sardonic.

"Drive them away, Billy," cried Effie, and the obedient king dropped his ax and threw a faggot of wood at the tree, which stopped the laughter and dispersed the merry-makers.

"Billy tired now," said the black grinning. "Too much work—plenty wood," and he pointed to the result of his labor.

"Yes, that will be enough, thank you. You're a good boy. I'll give you some tobacco."

"Billy's thirsty."

"Then you shall have some tea."

"No tea, Rum."

"No, Billy. Rum isn't good for you."

"Good for miners; good for Billy."

"No, it's not good for miners," said Effie emphatically. "It makes them fight and say wicked things."

"Makes black fellow feel good," declared Billy rolling his dusky eyes.

This last argument was effective. Effie went into her hut—her father had returned to his work—and poured a little of the spirits from John Archer's flask into a pannikin. Billy drank the spirits with rolling eyes, smacked his lips and then lay down in the shadow of the hut to sleep.

The long afternoon passed very slowly for Effie. Her few trifling duties as housekeeper were soon done. The little hut was tidied and the simple evening meal prepared and some hours must pass before her father returned. How could she pass the time? She had only two books—a Bible and a volume of stories for little girls, which she had won as a prize at school in Brisbane. But she was too young to appreciate the first, especially as the type was very small and it was difficult reading, and she had grown beyond appreciating the stories for little girls, having known them by heart three years before. She would like to have slept. Everything around her suggested and invited the siesta—the steady beat, the brightness of the light without the hut, the distant murmur of miners' voices which came from beyond yonder belt of wattle gums, the monotonous hum of the locusts in the forest, the occasional fretful cry of a strange bird and the regular snores of the fallen king, who slumbered in the shade of the hut. Even the buzz of the annoying flies assisted the general effect and brought drowsiness.

To remain still for a few minutes would have meant inevitably falling asleep. Effie felt this and remembered the little gold nugget. If she slept, some thief might come and take it. And so she put on her hat and, forsaking the seductive cool and shade of the hut, went out into the brightness and heat.

returned, drying her face in her apron and shaking her wet hair in the sun. No one had come, but King Billy was now awake and was slouching lazily off toward the bush. Effie laughed as she saw him, his great head bent forward and his thin, narrow shoulders bowed. She laughed to think of his laziness and that he should look so tired after such a very little woodchopping.

She was still laughing at King Billy as she opened the old workbox to take another peep at the yellow treasure and to make quite sure that the heat hadn't melted it away. And it was quite slowly that the laugh died from her pretty eyes and mouth—quite slowly because of the moments it took to realize and accept a misfortune so terrible—when she lifted the coarse socks and looked and saw no little gold nugget, saw nothing. Then horror and great fear grew in the blue eyes, and pale agony crept over the childish face and made it old, and the poor little heart seemed to stop beating.

Effie said nothing and made no cry, but she closed her eyes tightly for a moment and looked in the box again. No, it was no illusion. The little nugget was not there. The first gold her father had found, which had been entrusted to her care, which was to have been taken to her mother—it was gone. She put down the box quite quietly and walked out into the day. But the sun was shining very strangely and mistily now, and the blue sky had grown black, and the trees seemed to move weirdly, and the locusts had ceased humming from fear, but the strange bird was somewhere near, shrieking brokenly: "What will father say? What will father say?"

But as the child stood, there despairing her sight grew clearer, and she saw a black figure among the trees, and she was conscious of a pair of dusky eyes watching her through the leaves. Then only she remembered, and she knew who had done this cruel thing. King Billy! And she had been kind to him. Effie burst into passionate sobbing. The black figure still hovered among the trees, often changing its position, and the dusky eyes still peered through the leaves. And the laughing jackasses flew down to the old tree again and laughed more madly than before—laughed at Effie's trust, at Billy's gratitude!

It was 10 o'clock, and darkness and quiet reigned in John Archer's hut. Over among the tents behind the wattle gums a few gamblers and heavy drinkers were still awake, and their voices, raised in anger or ribald merriment, might occasionally have been faintly heard from the hut. But Archer, who had sown his wild oats, was a true worker, and he had his little daughter, for whose sake he had built the hut away from the noisy camp.

Archer had come home late and weary, as usual, had eaten his supper and gone to rest without, to Effie's intense relief, speaking of the little gold nugget. The child was afraid to speak of the loss, and she was not without vague hopes that a beneficent Providence would restore the nugget during the darkness and save her from this great trouble.

For this she prayed very earnestly before she lay down to sleep. Or did she sleep at all that night? She never quite knew. But she thinks that it was then that she first experienced that terrible purgatorial condition which is neither wakefulness nor sleep when the body and mind are weary enough to bring the profound sleep which they require, but which the brain is too overladen and too cruelly active to allow, when dreams seem realities and realities dreams. It must have been a dream when she saw something small and yellow float through the tiny window on the ghostly silver moonbeams. And yet when, having closed her eyes, she opened them again it was still there, hovering about in the darkness, less bright now and with a pale yellow halo. But it faded quite away. It was a cruel, mocking dream.

Then was it a dream when the old curtain which divided her corner of the hut from her father's moved slightly toward her? It would be curious to see, and she lay still. From under the curtain seemed to come a thin arm and slowly, cautiously, after the arm a head with a great shock of hair. And the moonbeams just touched a face. I think they kissed it, though it was black, for they found in a black hand the little yellow object which had floated in the first dream.

It was so real, so beautiful, that the child lay still, scarce daring to breathe lest the vision should melt away and when in her dream came the voice of her father with the words, "Speak, or I'll fire!" her lips refused to open. But it was no dream when the shot came and the black king rolled over on the earth dead, with the little gold nugget he had come to restore pressed in the death agony against his heart, where, too, was a little gold.

And the laughing birds in the old tree, startled from their sleep by the shot, laughed once more, wildly and madly, at Billy's honesty.—Exchange.

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