

THE POPPY GIRL BY BEATRICE HERON MAXWELL

She stood facing the sunset, a motionless figure in her white dress, with a tall sheaf of crimson garden poppies at her side, and in her lifted right hand a single poppy bloom, held between her eyes and the glowing shafts of light that struck into them.

The glow of the tower and of the sun were reflected on the transparent whiteness of her face, and she looked the incarnation of living flame; even her bright, soft eyes holding gleams of rose red in their liquid depths.

They had only just reached the outskirts of Braxton, three days ago, Geoffrey Paget and Hope and seeing this picturesque old house standing back from the roadside with its open gates inviting them to enter, they wandered up the garden path, and so chanced upon this vision.

They stood transfixed, and in that moment of surprised admiration something came to Geoffrey which had never before troubled his prosaic mind—some sudden understanding of the romance that Love might bring into their garden; some subtle prescient sense of an infinite joy and sadness to come, and the glory which an absorbing passion might bring into a commonplace life.

She looked at them without speaking, and one of them, the older, lifted his hat and told her that, being strangers in the land and tired after a long day's journey, they would be glad to learn the direction of the hotel. She pointed up the path to where a veranda glistened through the trees, saying: "This is it," and they passed on, leaving her standing with the same rapt stillness of attitude, gazing toward the horizon.

Geoffrey, who usually discoursed freely on the incidents of the day, held his peace, and his friend respected his silence, feeling vaguely that it was prompted by some soft of hidden feeling. They stayed not only that night but the next, making as the reason for breaking the sequence of their tour the necessity for a long ride to some town in the distance.

Freedom and Geoffrey and Basil were companions, for when the friends turned the key of their apartments in the city they left their work and their responsibilities behind them, and could take their holiday with ease, devoid of care. Three weeks more of pleasant wandering in this golden autumn season (by before them) and the quiet of this little atmospheric village, with neither war nor rumors of war seemed to disturb the placid gathering of harvest, pleased them well. But when the second night had passed, and Basil hinted at a move, Geoffrey's inclination veered to rest, and a long summer over the hills.

"We had a hard ride yesterday, Basil," he said. "Let us take a day off."

And he gained his way as usual.

Yet when he returned in the gloaming he wore a restless, dissatisfied look—the look of one who had failed in a quest, and his friend, seeing it, decided to keep silence no longer.

"That was a strange girl," he began, "whom we saw the night we came to this village."

"The poppy girl," murmured Geoffrey, absently.

"Yes, she looked as if she might have a history."

"What became of her? Is she staying at the hotel?"

"Apparently not," Geoffrey had come out of his reverie, and there was an alertness in his face that meant where, they say, though the odd thing is that no one seems to know exactly where. "Over the hill yonder," the sexton thought.

The sexton? It seemed an incongruous medium for such a vision of living fire as the sunset had presented.

"You have not seen her since, I suppose? I wonder who she was."

"Why do you speak of her in the past tense? Whoever she was she is still, I expect."

"There was a transient hint of irritation in his voice, unusual in Geoffrey. He took life almost too placidly as a rule."

"Yes, but I was thinking of her in the past relatively. We must be getting on tomorrow, Geoffrey. I wonder what would be the best route to Edgemoor Valley."

"There is no 'must,'" he answered, "we are free agents. The essence of a holiday is to be happy-go-lucky."

"Well, shall we explore this neighborhood a little more?"

Geoffrey's good nature was not proof against his friend's ready compliance; he assented amiably, and they sketched a rough plan of campaign, open to amendment, for the ensuing day.

It was in the busy dusk of a gray day with a touch of autumn chill and drowsiness in its twilight that, as they skirted the brow of a hill an evening or two later, Geoffrey put his bridle on suddenly, and descending with reckless haste at a precarious corner, exclaimed: "There she is!"

Hope dismounted more leisurely, and retracing his steps, gazed down a steep hillside that led to the valley, and discerned the faint glow of something red far below.

"How do you know?" he asked quietly. "It might be a parcel or a hat, but it might also be several other things. You surely cannot distinguish form or features from here."

"I know it is she," Geoffrey repeated, unmoved. "Let us see, now, what landmarks are there to guide us. That spur to the left is the point, and the road winding away to the right is the one we came by this morning. It would be easy to find the spot by daylight."

He essayed no explanation or excuse for his evident determination to trace this elusive phantom of a girl once seen for the space of a single moment; rather did he take

it for granted that the matter was a well-remembered one. And his friend, knowing him, and therefore aware that his behavior was abnormal, said nothing, though later on he reproached himself for an acquiescence that seemed indefensible.

For five days Hope scarcely saw his holiday companion at all, each morning on descending to breakfast there could be a message from a hired messenger saying that Geoffrey did not feel up to the bridle arrangement for that day, and would just about while his friend slept up to the original plan, arguing that it would be a pity for both to miss seeing the various places of interest, that were within riding distance. Conduct inexplicable at any other time, but that he seemed strangely enough only a natural outcome of what had gone before.

Hope, putting resolutely aside a dawning misgiving, carried out the written and unwritten desire of his defaulting friend and went off alone on the four expeditions that occupied him from morning until evening accepting without comment the reflection of Geoffrey as to his own manner of spending the day. It seemed impossible that much harm could result from a week's unattractive inactivity in any case. Yet when, owing to an accident to his wheel, Hope found himself later by three hours in getting back than he had intended, he went straight to Geoffrey's room, an indefinite sickly haunting his steps.

Geoffrey was not there, nor had any one at the inn seen him since the morning. Their usual dinner hour was past. It was beginning to grow dark. Basil felt his uneasiness deepen. He decided to go and look for Geoffrey, and involuntarily turned his steps to the hollow between Riddle Mount and the road. Even before he came up to them he knew he should find them together, and he guessed that there would be something startling to learn.

They were so absorbed in each other that they never even heard his approach, and, being within earshot before he perceived this, Basil halted, uncertain whether to make his presence known or retire, now that he was assured of Geoffrey's safety. She had a red cloak on her, a slender figure, and while with one hand she held it together, the other was yielded to Geoffrey, who was pressing it to his lips.

"I could not come sooner," she was saying breathlessly, "and, O, Geoff, I ought not to have come at all! If I were married—I don't know if I will think of it. The one reason is sufficient, Geoff—I must come no more."

"Geoff," she said, "those five days might as well have been five weeks."

"Natalie, my little love," Geoff made answer with subdued emphasis, "this great reason is none at all. It does not exist for me. A hundred such reasons would not part us."

He had taken her hands and clasped them round his neck; the cloak slipped down unheeded; she was in his arms.

In the shadow of the trees Basil crept slowly away and retraced his steps, running as soon as he reached the road again, in order to outdistance Geoff. When Geoff came in there was a light in his eyes that transfused him. The hour had transformed him; he looked a god who had wrestled with fate and gained the mastery. He came straight up to Hope and said: "I want you to do two things, old man: forgive me and congratulate me. Natalie Truherne has promised to marry me."

Hope held out his hand, and Geoff gripped it; then he went away to his own room. They knew each other well, those two; words were never wasted between them. What shadow of evil was it that haunted Basil all that night and turned his mind into an abyss of doubts and fears and questions? He strove in vain to shake it off, and still an aching was his hold upon his soul that when a glimpse of dawn came he got up with feverish haste and went to Geoffrey's room. The door was ajar, and he could see his friend lying asleep, a happy smile on his lips; and at his side, set in a glass, a poppy, limp and drooping, its flaunting freshness vanished.

The sight reassured him for a time; yet still the thought was urgent that seemed hounding him to seek for an answer to his problems, and as the day broadened he wandered down the garden path, where first they had seen her—and on to the bend of the road, where he loitered for a space trying to balance his mental attitude.

Useless! The impulse sent him on, and presently he found himself near the place where they had met the night before.

"My God!" The words escaped him unconsciously, while he hurried forward.

She lay just within the fence that bordered a garden, and had evidently been about to climb over it when a hand from the back had struck her down. The rainbow mist of morning touched her nose and throat, and there, as Basil, stooping, put an arm under to raise her, he found that it was wet with blood, and sickened at the sight. He noticed, as unconsciously one takes in small details at a crisis, that on the hand which held the poppies was Geoffrey's signet ring. It occurred to him that it would be best to go for assistance before moving her.

One dark night Judge Henson was walking on the outskirts of the town when a figure rose up before him. He put his hand to his revolver and strode towards the figure. It was the Octopus.

"I guessed you were out this way, sir," he said, raising his hat as he stepped towards her.

"I believe you are the new Judge?" she responded. And before he could reply she added: "I don't think you'll like Longville."

He was about to reply, when he realized how closely the men were watching him. In a quick under-tone he asked her her real name.

"Nina Braine," she said hesitatingly.

He turned around and held his glass aloft. "Boys," he said, with a quick glance around him, "here's health to Miss Braine!"

Not a man stirred or spoke; not a glass or mug went up. And Mr. Henson was right in guessing that to him, not to the woman, was the insult shown. But it had shown it in the attitude he might expect in the men, and to learn that had been the motive of the toast it was war. Without changing his expression he turned his back upon the men, and resumed his conversation with the Octopus.

Presently a tall man, with a rough voice and evil face, forced his way up to Mr. Henson, and, with a bow of mock respect, said: "Mister Judge, I has the honor to introduce to you myself—the worst bad man in Longville."

In that case," replied Mr. Henson quietly, looking the man over, "we shall probably meet again in another place where it will not be necessary for you to introduce yourself."

The man shuffled back into the crowd.

"You gave him the right answer," the Octopus whispered to Mr. Henson. "Now go!"

He realized that the advice was sound, finished his drink, and stepped out into the road. In three weeks Mr. Henson established himself firmly in Longville, and in the bitter hatred of all who regarded him as a habitual or incidentally which practically embraced the entire population of the district. Officially and privately, the new Judge had made enemies by the score. His worst official crime was his act of forestalling the boys in an opening affair.

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She stood facing the sunset

"There is a young lady who, I think, must be lying out there in the copse; and she has been badly hurt. I am afraid—"

He broke off for the man, feeling, staggered, and would have fallen but that Basil caught his arm.

"Don't give way, man. You just come and help me to carry her in. Who lives here?"

But the man seemed too speechless with terror to answer, and meanwhile Basil was hurrying him towards the fence, though when they reached it he had to lift the other over; for his powers seemed all to have deserted him.

He turned from doing this he saw that some one was before him, some one who bent over the girl, chanting a strange, weird song, and scattering poppies round her head with fantastic gestures.

"It is the young master," muttered the old man. "I always thought how it would be."

And with his words the whole scene seemed to flash into Basil's mind—the story as he heard it afterwards—the brother weak in intellect, but too dear to the sister to be cut away as mud; the sister devoting her life to him, and the giving up of all that her youth and loveliness demanded and

assured for his sake; the discovery by the lad that some one had gained her affections, and might usurp his place; and the terrible means he had taken to prevent her desertion of him.

"Go—you—and leave us," said the old servant; "the young master will be more crazed if he sees you. I'll carry her in, and my wife will see to her."

"I shall go for the doctor at once," said Hope with a stern decision, and as you had better put that lad under lock and key. He should not be at large."

And vaulting over the fence he ran at full speed towards the hotel, and finding Geoffrey broke his terrible news; then the time flashed by while they rode at full speed first to the doctor's and then to Riddle Mount. The house was closed and barred, and for some time no noise was taken of their clamor for entrance, but finally the old man cautiously unlocked and admitted the doctor alone.

Then came hours of suspense, and, at last, near midnight, the doctor came out to them.

"There is little hope," he said; "she is badly hurt, poor girl. I have taken the liberty," he added grimly, "of putting her brother under restraint. He is an imbecile, of course, and it was mistaken kindness on your part, keeping him with her. I am afraid she will not last over the night."

It was not until the doctor had returned to take his place at her side again, and made a signal to them that she still lived, that Hope advised Geoffrey at last to go back to the hotel for rest and food. Two hours later as they started for Riddle Mount again, they met the doctor on the outskirts of the village.

"I am called to another case," he said. "I was obliged to leave her, but she was quite unconscious. I do not think there will be any chance for some hours; and I fear that there is not much chance of recovery."

They rode on in absolute silence; Geoffrey's gray set face showing that the iron had entered into his soul. When they reached the house they were surprised to find that the door yielded to their touch, and that an old woman and a stout, they mounted slowly, in perplexity, meeting nobody hearing no sound. When they had reached the second landing the amazing truth flashed upon them; the house was empty! Their search, both in the house and around it, and then farther afield in every direction that seemed possible, was fruitless.

"What might we do?" said Hope, when at last they acknowledged themselves beaten, and returned to the hotel.

"Nothing," Geoffrey answered dully. "They have lived in obscurity by her wish; and the old man has probably acted under her orders. I shall devote my life to finding some trace of her, but we have no right to make it all public property."

That was his final resolve, and the stir caused in the neighborhood—a slight one for the people were easy-going—by the "fitting" from Mount Riddle, waned and subsided, without any help from either Geoffrey or Hope.

The two friends returned to the city; one of them graver and sadder for his friend's trouble, and the other aged by many years, and with all his light-hearted contentment in life vanished and dead.

It was a wild, wet evening in late November, and Geoffrey, newly returned from one of his wanderings, and stooped at the outer door of his apartments to pick up something lying on the mat, and carried it into the sitting room—a small oblong parcel bearing an Italian postmark! With a transient curiosity he cut the string and removed the lid of the box; then sat staring at the contents, without a word of color in his face.

"What is it?" asked Hope, solemnly, coming towards him.

Geoffrey pointed mutely to the box. It was full of scented poppies.

"It would be an miracle," he said brokenly. "It is not possible—yet, Basil—who else in all the world would send them?"

"Any letter with it?" asked Hope.

Geoffrey's eager hands lifted the flowers out and caught at a little slip of foreign paper.

"If you would care to see me—come; if not, take these as a remembrance only of a lost friend."

The weight of years seemed suddenly lifted from him, and he stood illuminated in a haze of confused joy.

Three days later, in a sunny garden, against a background of crimson blossoms, he held her in his arms again, his love come back to him from the grave.

"I did not like to write to you," she told him, "until my poor boy, my brother, died. We were orphaned, Geoff, as you know, and he had no one but me and old Matthew. When he had his bad accident and lost his mind, Matthew and I made up our minds to keep him with us. We could not bear him to go to strangers. He came to himself just before the end and prayed my forgiveness, and blessed us for it."

"But how is it that you are alive? And how did you get away from Riddle Mount?"

"It was the long sleep saved me. When Matthew found that I was better and knew that my brother was going to be taken from me he contrived our flight. He had a band of gypsies to lend us one of their wagons, and take us on with them. He knew no one would guess that we were there. So we got away."

"And my poor boy just dropped and faded away. The last thing he asked me was that I should write you; he knew the whole story then and understood."

And, clasping her in his arms, Geoffrey felt that all the suffering was atoned for by this perfect moment.

KING LOVE BY TRANBY ELLIS.

LONGVILLE'S healthy enough I reckon, if you fight shy of the Octopus."

He was a weather-tanned Texan of about fifty and fifty, who gave this advice. His companion was quite a young man, in the full strength and glory of life.

The two men had met on the main track, some distance out of the town, and had struck up a quiet companionship.

"And of what nature is this dreaded Octopus?" the young man inquired.

"That ain't an easy question to guess," said the other thoughtfully. "Chaps have held as how she was an angel, but I reckon they've finally concluded she is Old Nick's sister. They all lack. She's a niece of the boss of the Rust Star, an' she's reckoned the handsomest woman that ever come out west!"

"How came she by the nickname Octopus?"

"Because she catches the boys, I reckon. Once she gets 'em lovin' her she laughs at 'em an' drives 'em mad. I've known men quite as good as you blow out their brains because of 'er. Maybe you've come out for pleasure; if so, dodge 'er."

"I have an appointment in Longville. My name is Henson."

"The judge? Then you've come to keep order, eh?"

"Among other things—yes."

"Then, bundle Octopus out of the town first and get out home from Longville next. That's my advice."

"Thank you," said Mr. Henson quietly.

The arrival of the new judge in Longville caused a sensation in the district. Never had the state authorities so wantonly offended the Longvillers as by this move of sending down a special judge. Thus it befell that on the evening of Mr. Henson's arrival in the town he had a most crowded square in the afternoon meeting was held under the exchange, awaiting that stretched out into the road from the front of the hotel. And the advent and future of the new judge was discussed and debated in words and tones the reverse of polite.

The last person to be expected in the midst of such a social gathering was Mr. Henson, and, true to the custom, he made it his business to pass that way. He sat down and called for a refreshing drink. Talk was stopped instantly and every eye was fixed upon him. Now, it chanced that before the glass had been put into Mr. Henson's hands his eyes fell upon the face of a young woman who came round the corner of the hotel as if intending to join the throng under the exchange. Instinct told him she was the

Octopus. In an instant he appreciated what a power such a woman could be in such a place. If she was as bad as she was beautiful, her eyes could have no bounds for her.

Her eyes met his, dilated and quickly contracted into an expression of haughty fulness and her lips curved slightly. Again their eyes met—his in a cold, calculating kind of way; hers half playfully, half admiringly.

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"I believe you are the new Judge?" she responded. And before he could reply she added: "I don't think you'll like Longville."

He was about to reply, when he realized how closely the men were watching him. In a quick under-tone he asked her her real name.

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She was no longer ready to laugh and flirt with the roughest, or accept each and every present and compliment offered her. From a laughing, chattering flirt, she had changed into a quiet, sober, thoughtful woman.

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she said. "Don't go back to the town, sir."

"My good girl," exclaimed the judge, "what are you afraid of?"

"Trouble," she replied. "Trouble for you and all who love you. I can't tell you what, but don't go back. I haven't risked nothing to warn you."

"Warn me, eh?" he said, more seriously. "Many thanks, Miss Braine; but I am not defenseless."

"But you don't know how many there are!"

"I have risked more than you can ever guess to warn you," she said, sadly. "And are you mad?" she added passionately. "To mistrust me?"

"Very well. I will be on my guard, and if I encounter danger I will thank you in my heart."

Nevertheless he kept his eyes open and his ears picked until he reached his house, and encountering no one, his suspicion of the woman increased. However, even she had slipped his mind before he put aside his book and went to bed. About midnight he awoke, feeling a hand upon his mouth and saw the figure of a man.

"Quick! Up an' dress an' be quiet!" whispered the man in a soft, almost tender, voice. He sprung from the bed. He had been sleeping in his clothes—a habit he had acquired since he learned how deep was the local prejudice against him. He seized the man by the throat, and he was as he arms felt limp in his arms again, for it was the soft, supple throat of a woman he had crushed in his grasp.

"The name, sir!"

"Nina," he cried.

"All then you think of me as Nina, eh? The Octopus? Then I am happy!" Her tone was a cry. "You must be quick! Find your horse, and get away by the silver pass!"

"Why?" he asked sternly, the old suspicion in his mind again.

"Because you are in danger. I want to warn you tonight because I fear your life was in peril. I come to save you because I know you are in peril. O, judge, don't hesitate an' doubt me! Nina, the woman—Nina, who would live and die for you, implores you to believe her!"

There was such a constant ring in her voice that he believed her.

"What is this danger?" he inquired.

"My leavers," she moaned, pointing through the window. "Is there?"

Strange forms were hurrying from bush to bush in the garden without—forms of crawling men.

The woman took the judge's hand and