



MILLIE (1913)

By Katherine Mansfield

Millie stood leaning against the verandah, until the men were out of sight. When they were far down the road Willie Cox turned round on his horse and waved. But she didn't wave back. She nodded her head a little and made a grimace. Not a bad young fellow, Willie Cox, but a bit too free and easy for her taste. Oh, my word! it was hot. Enough to fry your hair! Millie put her handkerchief over her head and shaded her eyes with her hand. In the distance along the dusty road she could see the horses, like brown spots dancing up and down, and when she looked away from them and over the burnt paddocks she could see them still— just before her eyes, jumping like mosquitoes. It was half-past two in the afternoon. The sun hung in the faded blue sky like a burning mirror, and away beyond the paddocks the blue mountains quivered and leapt like sea. Sid wouldn't be back until half-past ten. He had ridden over to the township with four of the boys to help hunt down the young fellow who'd murdered Mr. Williamson. Such a dreadful thing! And Mrs. Williamson left all alone with all those kids. Funny! she couldn't think of Mr. Williamson being dead! He was such a one for a joke. Always having a lark. Willie Cox said they found him in the barn, shot bang through the head, and the young English "johnny" who'd been on the station learning farming—disappeared. Funny! she couldn't think of anyone shooting Mr. Williamson, and him so popular and all. My word! when they caught that young man! Well, you couldn't be sorry for a young fellow like that. As Sid said, if he wasn't strung up where would they all be? A man like that doesn't stop at one go. There was blood all over the barn. And Willie Cox said he was that knocked out he picked a cigarette up out of the blood and smoked it. My word! he must have been half dotty.

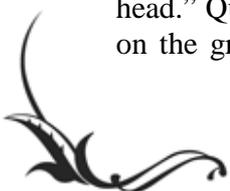
Millie went back into the kitchen. She put some ashes on the stove and sprinkled them with water. Languidly, the sweat pouring down her face, and dropping off her nose and chin, she cleared away the dinner, and going into the bedroom, stared at herself in the fly-specked mirror, and wiped her face and neck with a towel. She didn't know what was the matter with herself that afternoon. She could have a good cry—just for nothing—and then change her blouse and have a good cup of tea. Yes, she felt like that! She flopped down on the side of the bed and stared at the coloured print on the wall opposite, *Garden Party at Windsor Castle*. In the foreground emerald lawns planted with immense oak trees, and in their grateful shade, a muddle of ladies and gentlemen and parasols and little tables. The background was filled with the towers of Windsor Castle, flying three Union Jacks, and in the middle of the picture the old Queen, like a tea cosy with a head on top of it. "I wonder if it really looked like that." Millie stared at the flowery ladies, who simpered back at her. "I wouldn't care for that sort of thing. Too much side. What with the Queen an' one thing an' another." Over the packing-case dressing-table there was a large photograph of her and Sid, taken on their wedding day. Nice picture that—if you *do like*. She was sitting down in a basket chair, in her cream cashmere and satin ribbons, and



Sid, standing with one hand on her shoulder, looking at her bouquet. And behind them there were some fern trees, and a waterfall, and Mount Cook in the distance, covered with snow. She had almost forgotten her wedding day; time did pass so, and if you hadn't any one to talk things over with, they soon dropped out of your mind. "I wunner why we never had no kids ...". She shrugged her shoulders—gave it up. "Well, *I've* never missed them. I wouldn't be surprised if Sid had, though. He's softer than me."

And then she sat quiet, thinking of nothing at all, her red swollen hands rolled in her apron, her feet stuck out in front of her, her little head with the thick screw of dark hair drooped on her chest. *Tick-tick* went the kitchen clock, the ashes clinked in the grate, and the venetian blind knocked against the kitchen window. Quite suddenly Millie felt frightened. A queer trembling started inside her—in her stomach—and then spread all over to her knees and hands. "There's somebody about." She tiptoed to the door and peered into the kitchen. Nobody there; the verandah doors were closed, the blinds were down, and in the dusky light the white face of the clock shone, and the furniture seemed to bulge and breathe ... and listen, too. The clock—the ashes—and the venetian—and then again—something else, like steps in the back yard. "Go an' see what it is, Millie Evans." She darted to the back door, opened it, and at the same moment some one ducked behind the wood pile. "Who's that?" she cried, in a loud, bold voice. "Come out o' that! I seen yer. I know where y'are. I got my gun. Come out from behind of that wood stack!" She was not frightened any more. She was furiously angry. Her heart banged like a drum. "I'll teach you to play tricks with a woman," she yelled, and she took a gun from the kitchen corner, and dashed down the verandah steps, across the glaring yard to the other side of the wood stack. A young man lay there, on his stomach, one arm across his face. "Get up! You're shamming!" Still holding the gun she kicked him in the shoulders. He gave no sign. "Oh, my God, I believe he's dead." She knelt down, seized hold of him, and turned him over on his back. He rolled like a sack. She crouched back on her haunches, staring; her lips and nostrils fluttered with horror.

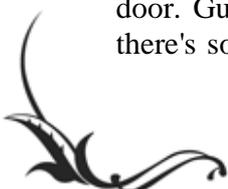
He was not much more than a boy, with fair hair, and a growth of fair down on his lips and chin. His eyes were open, rolled up, showing the whites, and his face was patched with dust caked with sweat. He wore a cotton shirt and trousers, with sandshoes on his feet. One of the trousers was stuck to his leg with a patch of dark blood. "I *can't*," said Millie, and then, "You've got to." She bent over and felt his heart. "Wait a minute," she stammered, "wait a minute," and she ran into the house for brandy and a pail of water. "What are you going to do, Millie Evans? Oh, I don't know. I never seen anyone in a dead faint before." She knelt down, put her arm under the boy's head and poured some brandy between his lips. It spilled down both sides of his mouth. She dipped a corner of her apron in the water and wiped his face and his hair and his throat, with fingers that trembled. Under the dust and sweat his face gleamed, white as her apron, and thin, and puckered in little lines. A strange dreadful feeling gripped Millie Evans' bosom—some seed that had never flourished there, unfolded and struck deep roots and burst into painful leaf. "Are yer coming round? Feeling all right again?" The boy breathed sharply, half choked, his eyelids quivered, and he moved his head from side to side. "You're better," said Millie, smoothing his hair. "Feeling fine now again, ain't you?" The pain in her bosom half suffocated her. "It's no good you crying, Millie Evans. You got to keep your head." Quite suddenly he sat up and leaned against the wood pile, away from her, staring on the ground. "There now!" cried Millie Evans, in a strange, shaking voice. The boy



turned and looked at her, still not speaking, but his eyes were so full of pain and terror that she had to shut her teeth and clench her hands to stop from crying. After a long pause he said in the little voice of a child talking in his sleep, "I'm hungry." His lips quivered. She scrambled to her feet and stood over him. "You come right into the house and have a sit down meal," she said. "Can you walk?" "Yes," he whispered, and swaying he followed her across the glaring yard to the verandah. At the bottom step he paused, looking at her again. "I'm not coming in," he said. He sat on the verandah step in the little pool of shade that lay round the house. Millie watched him. "When did yer last 'ave anythink to eat?" He shook his head. She cut a chunk off the greasy corned beef and a round of bread plastered with butter; but when she brought it he was standing up, glancing round him, and paid no attention to the plate of food. "When are they coming back?" he stammered.

At that moment she knew. She stood, holding the plate, staring. He was Harrison. He was the English johnny who'd killed Mr. Williamson. "I know who you are," she said, very slowly, "yer can't fox me. That's who you are. I must have been blind in me two eyes not to 'ave known from the first." He made a movement with his hands as though that was all nothing. "When are they coming back?" And she meant to say, "Any minute. They're on their way now." Instead she said to the dreadful, frightened face, "Not till 'arf past ten." He sat down, leaning against one of the verandah poles. His face broke up into little quivers. He shut his eyes and tears streamed down his cheeks. "Nothing but a kid. An' all them fellows after 'im. 'E don't stand any more of a chance than a kid would." "Try a bit of beef," said Millie. "It's the food you want. Somethink to steady your stomach." She moved across the verandah and sat down beside him, the plate on her knees. "Ere—try a bit." She broke the bread and butter into little pieces, and she thought, "They won't ketch him. Not if I can 'elp it. Men is all beasts. I don' care wot 'e's done, or wot 'e 'asn't done. See 'im through, Millie Evans. 'E's nothink but a sick kid."

Millie lay on her back, her eyes wide open, listening. Sid turned over, hunched the quilt round his shoulders, muttered "Good-night, ole girl." She heard Willie Cox and the other chap drop their clothes on to the kitchen floor, and then their voices, and Willie Cox saying, "Lie down, Gumboil. Lie down, yer little devil," to his dog. The house dropped quiet. She lay and listened. Little pulses tapped in her body, listening, too. It was hot. She was frightened to move because of Sid. "E must get off. 'E must. I don' care anythink about justice an' all the rot they've bin spoutin' to-night," she thought, savagely. "Ow are yer to know what anythink's like till yer *do* know. It's all rot." She strained to the silence. He ought to be moving. ... Before there was a sound from outside, Willie Cox's Gumboil got up and padded sharply across the kitchen floor and sniffed at the back door. Terror started up in Millie. "What's that dog doing? Uh! What a fool that young fellow is with a dog 'anging about. Why don't 'e lie down an'sleep." The dog stopped, but she knew it was listening. Suddenly, with a sound that made her cry out in horror the dog started barking and rushing to and fro. "What's that? What's up?" Sid flung out of bed. "It ain't nothink. It's only Gumboil. Sid, Sid!" She clutched his arm, but he shook her off. "My Christ, there's somethink up. My God!" Sid flung into his trousers. Willie Cox opened the back door. Gumboil in a fury darted out into the yard, round the corner of the house. "Sid, there's some one in the paddock," roared the other chap. "What is it—what's that?" Sid



dashed out on to the front verandah. “Ere, Millie, take the lantin. Willie, some skunk's got 'old of one of the 'orses.” The three men bolted out of the house, and at the same moment Millie saw Harrison dash across the paddock on Sid's horse and down the road. “Millie, bring that blasted lantin.” She ran in her bare feet, her nightdress flicking her legs. They were after him in a flash. And at the sight of Harrison in the distance, and the three men hot after, a strange mad joy smothered everything else. She rushed into the road—she laughed and shrieked and danced in the dust, jiggling the lantern. “A—ah! Arter 'im, Sid! A—a—a—h! Ketch him, Willie. Go it! Go it! A—ah, Sid! Shoot 'im down. Shoot 'im!”

