

# A Man in the Open

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## SYNOPSIS.

The story opens with Jesse Smith relating the story of his birth, early life in Labrador and of the death of his father. Jesse becomes a sailor. His mother marries the master of the ship and both are lost in the wreck of the vessel. Jesse becomes a cowboy in Texas. He marries Polly, a singer of questionable morals, who later is reported to have committed suicide. Jesse becomes a rancher and moves to British Columbia. Kate Trevor takes up the narrative. Unhappily married she contemplates suicide, but changes her mind after meeting Jesse. Jesse rescues Kate from her drink-maddened husband who attempts to kill her. Trevor loses his life in the rapids. Kate rejects offers of grand opera managers to return to the stage and marries Jesse. Their married life starts out happily. Kate succumbs to the pleadings of a composer to return to the stage and runs away with him. She rescues Widow O'Flynn from her burning house, is badly burned herself and returns home, where Jesse rescues her with open arms. Cattle thieves appear in the neighborhood. Jesse asks Kate to go to a place of safety. To his joy she refuses. Jesse resumes the narrative. He calls on neighbors and plans to capture the robbers. Kate is rescued from the hands of the bandits. The robbers are captured, but later make their escape. Jesse is captured by the robbers, but by a clever ruse makes prisoners of the robbers. They are turned over to a United States marshal, who has arrived with extradition papers. Jesse takes charge of the outlaw chief's son, Billy O'Flynn, having promised the chief to keep him out of his father's profession. He takes Billy to Vancouver.

## CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"Why, Billy daresn't say good morning to my pinto colt. He was bucking plentiful today, and me spitting blood before I got him conquered. Now just you leave me to tame colts and cowboys."

"Take him away, Jesse, dear." "He bin making love to you, Kate?" My heart stood still, and to my jealous husband silence means consent. Then the hypocrite in me sighed, and Jesse, flinging away his cigar stub, said with an oath that Billy should be on his way to Vancouver by daybreak.

Yes, Jesse is hard to manage, but presently he remembered about the check, which made him for the first time in his life feel rich. He's too rough when I let him love me. Indeed I had to do up my hair in the dark, though the fireflies offered the dearest little lamps. Besides a little jealousy is good for Jesse. I should not like to see his love go hungry.

Last night Jesse came home from Vancouver, and it being Sunday evening, he read and expounded the Scriptures to the amazement of the three new ranch hands.

Afterward, the night being cold, Jesse had his cigar beside the stove, while I sat on the low stool so that the fumes might rise above my unworthy head.

"The widow believes," I said, "that her boy will get rich in the city."

"I got Billy a job."

Jesse's face looked very grave.

"At a grocery," he added.

I sighed for the romantic lad, condemned to an apron behind the counter.

"And the young hawk flew off."

"I'm glad!"

"Ye see it's this way, Kate. He's shying heaps at Ashcroft, the first town he ever seen, where there's a bit of sidewalk, electric lights, and waitresses. I had to kiss the fluffy one to show him they don't bite."

"He's willing to start to work as a millionaire, but don't feel no holy vocation for groceries. So in the end he runs away, out of that frying pan into the—wall, the rest ain't clearly known, although the police has a clue. It seems my wolf cub leads some innocent yelling astray down by the harbor, said victim being the crimp from a sailors' boarding house. To prove he's fierce, Billy has a skinkful of mixed drinks, and this stranger is kind enough to take him to see a beautiful English bark which is turning loose for Cape Horn. Seems the ship takes a notion to Billy, and the captain politely axes him to work. He's been shanghaied."

"Oh, it's awful!" "Wall, maybe I'm a fool, Kate, but seems to be that this young person had to be weaned from running after a woman, before he'd any chance to be a man."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### Nativity.

*Kate's Narrative.*  
Jesse allowed that the upper forest does look "sort of woolly." He would post relays of ponies along the outward trail, so that he and McGee could ride the 80 miles back in a single march. If the doctor survived that, he would be here in 48 hours, perhaps in time.

I made Jesse take his revolver, yes, loaded it myself, and he promised a sign-I shot from the rim-rock to give me the earliest news of his return. He put out the light, kissed me good-by, and was gone.

From the inner edge of the bed I could see through the window and watched Orion rising behind the cliffs. The night turned pale, then for a long time the great gaunt precipice revealed in tender primrose light and amber shade. I heard our riders saddle, mount and canter away for the day's work. The two Chinamen went off also on some domestic errand. The sunrise caught the pines upon the rim-rock into points of flame. I heard a distant shot, and fell asleep.

The widow had stumped about nearly all night, weary to the tip of her wooden leg, poor soul, so when I woke again and crept to the lean-to door, it was a relief to find that she had gone to sleep. She had left me a saucapan full of bread and milk, which I warmed, and it warmed me nicely.

Mrs. O'Flynn asleep is like peace after war. Dressing in stealth, I prayed for peace in our time, then with a sweet enjoyment of fresh gull, stole out into the sunshine.

I reached the grove, at this cool hour so like a green lagoon where coral piers branch up to some ribbed vault. The waves of incense, the river's organ throb, the glory in the windows, gave me peace, but the choir of the winds had gone away, and for once in that sweet solitude I was lonely. My sitting is at the root of the governess tree, and Jesse's under the great father pine. If he were only there, how it would ease the pain. I needed him so badly as I sat there, trying to make him present in my thoughts. He had gone away, and the squirrel who lives in the widow tree had taken even his match ends. Only the cigar stubs were left, which would, of course, be bad for the squirrel's children. I wasn't well enough to call, but I left my nut.

Close by is the terrific verge of the inner canyon, and sitting at the very edge of death I saw into the mists.

It was so foolish, why should I be frightened of death, such a coward in bearing pain? And yet I had better confess the truth, that presently I ran away screaming, my skirt torn by brambles, by feet caught in the roots. Only when I passed the place where by anemones live, and beyond the east door of the grove came out into full sunlight, I could go no farther but fell to the ground exhausted. Yes, it was very silly, and that blind panic shamed me as I looked up at the crescent of silvery birch trees who hold court at the foot of the upper cliff.

Something small and black was coming toward me, a clergyman, too, and nervous, because he twiddled his little hat.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Are you a fairy?" I answered, wondering. I couldn't think of anything else at the moment, for our lost ranch is so far from everywhere.

"No, madam," he said quite gravely. "I'm only a curate. May I sit down?"

My heart went out to him, for he was so little, so old, English like me, but with the manner of the great world. When he sat down he took care not to hurt one of my flowers.

"I fear I'm trespassing," he said, "in your royal gardens. May I introduce myself? My name is Nisted—Jared Nisted, once an army chaplain, now a tourist."

"Are you sure," I ventured, "that you're not a—"

"Fairy? Believe me, dear lady, I'm a very commonplace little person."

"A humble admirer of yours, one Tearful George, has been kind enough to bring me here in his buckboard, which has complaining wheels, a creaky body, and such a wheezy horse. He, Tearful George, I mean, contracted for seventy-five dollars to bring me to paradise and back; but as we creaked our passage through that weird black forest I feared my guide had taken the pathway which leads to the other place. I confess, the upper forest frightened me, and now, having come to paradise, I don't want to go back." He sighed. "George," he added, "is making camp up yonder. Mrs. Smith, will you laugh at me very much if I tell you a fairy tale? It's quite a nice one."

"Oh, do!" I begged.

"Well," he began, "you know where the three birch trees are all using a single pool as their mirror?"

Of course these were the Three

Graces. Mrs. O'Flynn and I had known for months past that the spot was haunted.

"Each of them," said my visitor, "seems to think the others quite superfluous."

That was true. I asked him if anyone was there.

"A lady, yes."

"That's the minx," I whispered. "She's a fairy. But don't tell my husband. You know he laughs at me for being so superstitious."

I explained that my dear husband cannot see the minx, that my servant dare not look.

"I doubt," said Father Jared, with regret, "that very few fairies nowadays are superstitious enough to believe in us poor mortals."

For that I could have kissed him on "to believe in our forefathers, but there is a very general decline of faith. It is not for us to blame them. What fairy, for example, could be expected to believe in Tearful George? He chews tobacco."

"Oh, tell me more about her. Did she speak to you? She's fearfully dangerous. We had a ranch hand here who went quite fey, possessed, I think. I'm frightened of her now."

"She thinks," he retorted, "that you're a wicked woman."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. She said you would run away, and you did. I am to tell you that's very unwise."

"Please tell the minx to mind her own business."

"What is her business?" he asked mildly.

"Being a fairy, I suppose. I'll never forgive her for what she did to Billy. Besides," I added, "she makes fun of us."

"No wonder, for we humans are so stupid."

"She's full of mischief."

"Of course." The old man's eyes twinkled and blinked as though—I can't set words to fit that puzzled memory. He had told me twice that he was not a fairy. "I am to tell you from my lady, that she is not the minx. Winds, waves, and living things," he said, "are full of mischief and laughter. The sun has room to sparkle even in a tear, and Heaven touches our lips with every smile, for joy is holy. Spirits, angels, fairies, are only thoughts which have caught the light celestial, mirror-thoughts which shine in Heaven's glory. Children, and happy people see that light, which never shines on any clouded soul."

"My soul is clouded. Help me."

"I wonder," he smiled with his old kind eyes. "Have you a sense of hu-

manor? Ah,—there. Then you need never worry, or run away. As sunshine and rain are to the dear earth, so are laughter and tears to every living soul. Humor, dear, is the weather in which the spirit lives."

"But sorrow and tears?"

"Why, how can the sun make rainbows without rain?"

"You'll praise pain next."

"That is a sacrament," he answered gravely, "the outward sign of inward grace. For how else can God reach through selfishness down to the soul in need?"

I saw the dear priest's face through tears, but when I brushed them away the mist remained. He seemed remote, awful and beautiful.

"There is a place," he said "where souls awaiting incarnation, rest, and

from that place they come, borne by messengers. A messenger was waiting in these woods, no evil spirit, my daughter, but one who came bearing a child to you. She stands august and lovely at your back, and in her arms the soul of a man-child, just on the verge of incarnation, waits at the boundary of the spirit land.

"The light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

"That light is all around you, and I must go. This very ground is holy. Fare you well."

Two days had passed since my dear Jesse left, then through the long day I waited in the house, and the blue gloom of night swept up the glowing cliff. It was then I heard the signal shot from the rim-rock, and told my baby David that his father was coming home.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### The Locked House.

*Jesse's Memoir.*

The book of our adventures which we began together, was to go on through all our years. We were too young to think how it must some time finish at our parting, that one of us two was to be left with only the broken end, the pity of Christ and every word a stabbing memory.

Since I lost Kate is four years tonight, and in all that time now, I never dared to enter the house where once she lived with me, her poor fool Jesse.

Today I unlocked the door. The sunlight, glinting through chinks in the boarded windows, fell in long dust-streaks on rat-eaten furniture, gray cobweb, scattered ashes. There was the puppy piano, green with mold, her work basket, half eaten, her writing table littered with rat-gnawed paper. The pages are yellow, the ink is rusty brown, but the past is alive in every line, the living past, the sunny warm-scented land of memory, all full of love and glory and delight, and agony which cannot be taken from me.

How wonderful it is to think that a great lady, and this ignorant callous brute shown up in the rotted manuscript, should ever have been man and wife together! When I think of what I was—illiterate, slovenly, lazy, selfish, brutal, meanly jealous, ignorantly cruel, I see how it was right that she should leave me. It has taken me bitter lonely years to realize that I was unworthy to be her servant while she tamed me. So much the greater mystery is the love which made amends for my shortcomings, made her think me better than I was, a something for which she sacrificed herself, and in self sacrifice became like the great angels which she saw in dreams.

Then came the letter from Polly herself, which sent me crazy, so that my lady read every word of it, without being warned.

"Opium, Jesse, an overdose of opium did the trick, and paint to make me look like a corpse, and blood from the butcher's shop poured over my face as I laid there. You was no husband for such a me with Brooke around, the man I'd kept. Shucks, did ye think I'd be such a puke as to set, with yer dead-line round me, screaming if men came near, with all Ahlene grinning, and you drunk as Noah? That was no way to treat a lady. That was no cinch for me as could buy cowboys, all I'd a mind to. Pahaw, it makes me sick at the stomach to think I married you. I only done it for a joke."

"But you jest mark my words on the dead thieving, no foreign woman from London, England, shall have you while you're mine. I heard of this Mrs. Trevor daring to call you her husband. She's not your wife, she's not Mrs. Jesse Smith, she's not a married woman, but a poor thing, and her child, what's he? I've had my revenge on her, and you, and I'm coming to rub it in. I'm at Ashcroft, I am, coming on the same coach as this letter, coming to live in your home. If I don't love you, no other woman shall. It's Fancy Brooke, the man you calls Bull Durham, what give you dead away, he, and the news he got by mail, since you let him get off alive, you fool. That ought to splash yer."

"And if I didn't love, d'ys reckon that I'd care?"

"Your deserted true wife."

"POLLY SMITH."

"P. S.—I'll be to your ranch Monday."

*Kate's Narrative.*

My husband was still at dinner when we heard a horseman come thundering in, the old corgador, Pete Mathson, spurring a weary horse across the yard. Jesse took the letter, and while he read, I had a strange awful impression of days, months, years passing, a whirlwind of time. My man was growing old before my eyes, and it is true that within a few hours his hair was flecked with silver. When the letter fell from his hands he walked away, making no sound at all.

I sat on my little stool and took the letter. The paper felt like something very offensive, so that I had to force myself to read, and even then without understanding one word. I went and washed my hands and face, why I don't know, except that it was better

not to make a scene. I came back to my stool.

Pete stood in the doorway very nervous about his hat, as though he tried to hide it away. I remember telling him quite gravely that I like to see a hat.

"Cap Taylor, ma'am," he was saying, "told me to get here by the horse trail, so I rode hell-for-leather. They'll be another hour comin' by road."

"Another hour?"

"A stranger's driving. Mebbe more'n an hour."

Then Jesse came back.

### Jesse's Narrative.

I found my lady seated on her stool, that letter in her hands, while Pete, uneasy, clicked his spurs in the doorway. I asked if he'd take a message. "Burning the trail," he said.

"Say, if she comes, I'll kill her."

"Not that," my lady whispered, so I knelt down by her, and she stroked my forehead.

"I didn't catch your words," said Pete.

"Promise," my lady whispered, "there must be no murder."

"Tell her, Pete," said I, "there'll be no murder. I can't let her off with that—give her fair warning."

Pete rode away slow.

"Wife," I whispered—we spoke in whispers, because it was the end of the world to us two—"you trust me?"

She kissed my forehead.

"Tell me," she said, "one thing. Polly was not dead?"

"She shammed dead. She's alive, Kate. She's coming here. Take David away. Take him to South Cave, to Father Jared's camp."

"What will you do?"

"Lock the house before it's defiled."

"And then, dear?"

"When she's gone, I'll come to the cave, too."

Kate took David, letting me kiss him, letting me kiss her, even knowing everything, let me take her into my arms. She was very white, very quiet. She even remembered to take her servant, and the two Chinamen, making some excuse to get them away. I locked the house and the old cabin. Then I made the long call to Ephrata, and went to the Apex Rock, calling until he answered from among the dog-tooth violets. He climbed straight up the steep rocks, whimpering, because I'd scarcely called him once in fourteen months. He rubbed against me, forgetting he hefted eleven hundred pounds, and I had to scratch his neck before we started up to the house, then to the left along the wagon track just past Cathedral Grove.

The wagon was swinging round the end of the grove at a canter, and when I let out a yell for the last warning the woman only snatched at the driver's whip to flog the team faster. Then I turned loose my bear, he rearing up nine feet or so to inspect that outfit.

The horses shied into the air, then off at a gallop straight for the edge of the cliffs. The woman was shot out as the wagon overturned, the driver caught for a moment while his wagon went to match-wood. He lay in the wreckage stunned, but the horses went blind crazy, taking that twelve hundred feet leap into the Fraser rapids. So I had aimed, and as I'd promised my lady to do no murder, I kept my bear beside me.

The driver was awake and staggering to his feet. He would have talked, only my bear was with me, hard to hold by the roach hair. The man needed no telling, and after he escaped from my ranch I did not see him there in the years which followed.

The woman, standing in the wreckage of her trunks, wanted to talk. We herded her, Eph and I, to the foot of the pack trail, which leads up by steep jags to the rim-rock of the upper cliffs, then on through the black pines to Hundred Mile. We herded up the pack trail, my bear and I, and pointed her on her way, alone, afoot. If she lived through that eighty miles, she would remember the way, the way which is barred.

*Kate's Narrative.*

I was waiting for Jesse until the low sun shone into the cave. All that letter, which had been a blur of horror, cleared now before my mind, but Father Jared held me by the hands, drawing the pain away. He had given me tea, he had made me a very throne of comfort in front of his camp fire. David slept in my lap, and now while the dear saint held my hands, and I looked through the smoke out toward the setting sun, he spoke of quaint sweet doings in his hermitage. He spoke as a worldly anchorite with a portable bath, of his clumsy attempts to patch a worn-out cassock, and how the squirrels tried to superintend his prayers at even-song. Then the sun caught the walls of the cave and the roof to glowing beryl and ethereal ruby, the smoke was a rose-hued thread of light, and the deep canyon at our feet filled with a shadowy sea of flooding amethyst.

The sun had set, and the first star just shone out, as Jesse came, standing at the mouth of the cave, dark against the glory. I could not see his face.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



"Tell Her, Pete, There'll Be No Murder."