

# **THE CRESCENT MOON**

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The Crescent Moon by Francis Brett Young

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**FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG**

**THE CRESCENT  
MOON**



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# THE CRESCENT MOON

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## CHAPTER I

### I

WHEN I stepped on to the platform at Nairobi I hadn't the very least idea of what I was in for. The train for which we were waiting was due from Kisumu, bringing with it a number of Indian sepoy, captured at Tanga and Jasin, whom the Belgian advance on Taborah had freed. It was my job to see them into the ambulances and send them off to hospital. But when I got to the station I found the platform swarming with clerical hats and women who looked religious, all of whom couldn't very well have been swept into this degree of congregation for the sake of an odd sepoy's soul. These mean and ill-dressed people kept up a chatter like starlings under the station roof. It was a hot day in November, and the rains were due. Even six thousand feet of altitude won't stimulate you then. It had all the atmosphere of a sticky school treat in August at home . . . Baptists on an August Bank Holiday. That was how it struck me.

And anyway it was a nuisance: I couldn't get my ambulances on to the platform. "You see, sir, it isn't

a nonspital train," said the military policeman, "only a nordinary passenger train from the lake."

I asked him what all the crowd was about.

"They say," he replied cautiously, "as the missionaries is coming down. Them that was German prisoners."

So that was it. And a few minutes later the clumsy train groaned in, and the engine stood panting as though it were out of breath, as do all the wood-fuel engines of the Uganda Railway. The shabby people on the platform sent up an attempt at a cheer. I suppose they were missionaries too. My wounded sepoys had to wait until these martyrs were disgorged.

Poor devils. . . . They were a sad-looking crowd. I don't suppose Taborah in war-time had been a bed of roses: and yet . . . and yet one couldn't help feeling that these strange-looking creatures invited persecution. The men, I mean. Oh yes, I was properly ashamed of myself the next moment: but there's something about long-necked humility in clerical clothes that stirs up the savage in one, particularly when it moves slowly and with weak knees. Now to the cheers tears were added. They wept, these good people, and were very fluttered and hysterical: and the prisoners, poor souls, looked as if they didn't know where they were. It wasn't they who did the crying. I dare say, after all, they were quite admirable people and felt as sick at being slobbered over by over-emotional women as I did watching the progress. Gradually all of them were whipped off into cars that were wait-

ing outside and conveyed, no doubt, to Christian homes where the house-boys come in for evening prayers. All of them except one. . . .

I had noticed her from the first: principally, I imagine, because she seemed horribly out of it, standing, somehow, extraordinarily aloof from the atmosphere of emotionalism which bathed the assembly as in weak tea. She didn't look their sort. And it wasn't only that her face showed a little tension—such a small thing—about the eyes, as though the whole thing (very properly) gave her a headache. And I think that if she hadn't been so dreadfully tired she would have smiled. As it was, nobody seemed to take any notice of her, and I could have sworn that she was thankful for it. But that wasn't the only reason why I was interested in her. In spite of the atrocious black clothes which she wore, and which obviously hadn't been made for her, she was really very beautiful, and this was a thing which could not be said of any other woman on the platform. But the thing which most intrigued me was the peculiar type of beauty which her pale face brought back to me, after many years. This girl's face, happily unconscious of my gaze, was the spring of a sudden inspiration of the kind which is most precious to those who love England and live in alien lands: it brought to me, suddenly and with a most poignant tenderness, the atmosphere of that sad and beautiful country which lies along the March of Wales. Other things will work the same magic: a puff of wood smoke; a single note in a bird's song; a shaft of sunlight or a billow of cloud.



But here the impression was inconceivably distinct; so distinct that I could almost have affirmed the existence of some special bond between her and that country, and said: "This woman comes from the Welsh Marches somewhere between Ludlow and Usk, where the women have pale skins of an incredible delicacy, and straight eyebrows and serious dark eyes, and a sort of woodland magic of their own. And their voices . . ." I was certain that I knew what her voice would be like: so certain that I took the risk of disappointment and passed near her in the hopes that soon somebody would speak to her and then she would answer. I didn't have to wait long. A bustling female who oozed good works drew near. She held out her hand in welcome as she advanced.

"Well, my dear, are you Miss Burwarton?"

And my girl shivered. It was a little shiver which I don't suppose anyone else noticed. But why should she have shivered at her own name?

She said: "Yes, I'm Eva Burwarton."

I was right. Beyond doubt I was right. The "i" sound was deliciously pure, the "r" daintily liquid. Oh, I knew the sound well enough. My vision had been justified.

The bustling woman spoke:

"My dear, Mr. Oddy has been telling me about your poor dear brother. So sad . . . such a terrible loss for you. But the Lord . . ."

I didn't hear what precisely the Lord had done in this case, for a group of Sisters of Mercy in pale blue uniforms and white caps passed between us; but I saw

the appropriate and pious gloom gathering on Mrs. Somebody's face, and in the face of Eva Burwarton not the shadow of a reply, not the faintest gleam of sympathy or remembered grief.

Good Lord, I thought, this is an extraordinary girl who can't or won't raise the flicker of an eyelid when she's being swamped with condolences about a brother to whom something horrible has evidently happened. And then the busy woman swept her away, and all the length of the platform I watched her beautiful, pale, serious face. And with her going that sudden vision, that atmosphere which still enwrapped me, faded, and I turned to the emptier end of the platform, where the wounded sepoy were squatting, looking as pathetic as only sick Indians can. And I was back in Nairobi again, with low clouds rolling over the parched Athi Plains, and the earth and the air and every living creature athirst for rain and the relief of thunder. A funny business. . . .

But all that day the moment haunted me: that, and the girl's white face and serious brows, and the extraordinary incongruity of her ill-made, ill-fitting dress with her pale beauty. And her name, Eva Burwarton, which seemed somehow strangely representative of her tragic self. At first I couldn't place it at all. It sounded like Warburton gone wrong. And then when I wasn't thinking of anything in particular, I remembered that there was a village of that name somewhere near Wenlock Edge. And once again with a thrill I realised that I was right.

And after that I couldn't help thinking of her. I

can't exactly say why. I don't think it was for the sake of her physical attractions: indeed, when I came to speak to her, when in the end she was driven, poor thing, into a certain degree of intimacy with me, I believe this aspect of her was quite forgotten. No . . . I think the attraction which she exercised over me was simply due to the curious suggestiveness which clung to her, the thing which had set me dreaming of a place or an atmosphere which it was an ecstasy to remember, and the flattering discovery that I had something more than imagination on which to build. And then, when my friendliness, the mere fact that we had something, even if it were only a memory, in common had surprised her into getting the inexpressible story off her mind, the awful spiritual intensity of the thing was so great that everything else about her was forgotten; she became no more than the fragile, and in glimpses the pathetic, vehicle of the drama. Nothing more: though, of course, it was easy enough for anyone who had eyes to see why poor old M'Crae (*alias* Hare) had fallen in love with her.

## II

But at first, as I say, it was nothing more than the flavour of the country-side which she carried with her that held me. When next I saw her she had shed a little of that tender radiance. She had been furnished by some charitable person with clothing less grotesque. She certainly wasn't so indefinitely tragic; but now that she was less tired her country complexion—so