

The stranger breathed a sigh of relief. He knew now that he had arrived at his destination. He struck off a little to the right where a good-sized private house, surrounded by a paling fence, obviously sheltered the owner or foreman of the ranch. The privacy of this place was protected by a board which said succinctly: "Keep Out," but the Englishman, undeterred by the warning, kept on, and strode up the gravel walk to the rose-embowered porch beyond. He was a little daunted, however, by the prevailing silence. He would have welcomed the bark of a dog or some gruff voice demanding what he wanted. To walk into such a tomb-like quiet made him uncomfortable. He saw himself in imagination possibly misjudged; beset maybe; and his hand tightened on his stick, and he set his feet down more loudly than ever to assert the uprightness of his intentions. He tramped up the three steps leading to the porch like a mule battery going into action. But the stillness remained unbroken by any noise but his own.

He looked about in perplexity until at last, in the darkest and furthest corner, he detected a hammock; and saw, not without relief, that it was occupied by a recumbent figure. He went over to it, still in his heavy, soldierly fashion, and looked down on—well, what in his words he used to describe afterwards as: "Pon my soul, the most beautiful creacha' I was ever privileged to gaze upon—Gad, a girl of twenty, with her lips a little parted on the whitest teeth you ever saw, and her breath comin' and goin' as faint as a baby's in a cot, and beauty? Why, it was like seein' the Taj Mahal by moonlight—the same indescribable what'd'yecallum, you know, when something seems to take you by the throat and you gasp, my boy, positively gasp!"

She was dressed in silvery gray, with a wide lace collar about her neck, and in her thick, rumpled chestnut hair there lay a single red carnation. She was as fresh and sweet and exquisite as the flower itself; and in contrast to the dust and heat without, the sight of her was as refreshing as a splashing pool in the depths of a woody canyon. The Captain, after his first moment of surprise, began to wonder what steps he ought to take to awaken her. Every instinct as a gentleman bade him cough. So he coughed. At first so gently that it was almost a lullaby, and then by degrees rising to an honest, growling, bulldogish cough that seemed to say: "Wake up, blast you."

At last she stirred and opened her eyes and met those of the stranger looking down at her. He said hastily, "I beg your pardon," and betrayed enough agitation to spill a box of candy and a half-opened novel from the chair beside him. The girl sat up in the hammock, still gazing at him with astonishment, and asked him who he was and where he came from. ("Gad, sir, in a voice like a Cashmiri flute on the Lake of Selangor, borne over the water at dusk! Or the bulbul in one of those moldy old gardens where the Rajput princes held high revel in the Company's days!") "My name is Anstruther," he said, picking chocolate creams off the floor. "Captain Anstruther of the British Army."

She smiled at him without saying a word.

"You are, I presume, Miss Helen Jaffrey?" he went on.

She showed the least little sign of embarrassment and colored perceptibly as she assented with a movement of her head.

"Extraordinary!" ejaculated the Captain. "Most extraordinary!"

"Why," she asked.

It was the Captain's turn to look

out. "I'm not accustomed to awaken the young ladies I call on," he said. "I pride myself on being a man of the world, but positively, for once, I felt myself staggered. I nearly went away."

"There was my side of it too," she said.

They both laughed and the Captain asked permission to take a chair. He could be a very agreeable man when he chose and it was plain that he was choosing. His manner was almost too

ingratiating and Helen could not but wonder inwardly what he was after.

"My business—is rather with your father," he said.

"He's at the Hot Springs, sick," she said. "I'm running the Winery for him. Can't you make me do?"

"You don't mean to say that you are in charge of this whole establishment!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, I'm the boss here," she returned, "though of course I have Pa on the wire, you know. What can I do for you, Captain? We'll only be too glad to make an opening over there for our wines—that is, if your rating is good and you represent responsible people."

"Oh, it isn't wine," said the Captain hastily. "It's—uh—something very different."

"You can ring up Pa in the next room," she said helpfully. "Call up Long Distance and ask for Byron Hot Springs."

"It isn't the kind of thing you can very well telephone," said the Captain.

"His real name is William Charles Hepworth St. John Gray," said the Captain impressively.

"Well, all he's got left of that is his glass eye," she said. "That's why the boys call him Glass-Eyed Bill, you know."

It took the Captain a little time to get over the shock.

"I have a particular reason to know all about Mr. Gray," he said at last.

"Such a reason might be friendly or unfriendly," she said.

The Englishman sprang from his chair.

"My dear young lady," he exclaimed, "I wouldn't have you think for a moment that my interest could be for anything but for his advantage. I beg you to believe that. It would be premature to explain why, but will you not take it on trust? Besides, it is not as though I did not know the whole miserable story of his decline and virtual disappearance. All I ask of you is to fill in the details."

She gave him a very searching look.

end of him. But I couldn't resist a man like that, could I? Besides it was awfully pitiful—he was so evidently the real thing—so handsome, even in his terrible clothes—a gentleman, you know."

The Captain wriggled nervously on his chair. These recollections seemed to make him acutely uncomfortable. His shrewd tanned face was bright with an interest not untouched with shame. Had Helen needed any assurance as to his concern in Bill, the expression of his face would have been sufficient.

"We knew he was in very hot water," he said. "We knew he had parted from nearly all the associations—the refinements of . . . Had lost caste and sunk lower and lower in the Western Avernus—but we never dreamed he had been reduced to— to—"

"The chicken of charity," said the girl, filling in the gap.

"I would call it rather the husks of the Prodigal Son," said the Captain solemnly.

"Are you the elder brother?" she asked.

"No, no," returned the Captain, "only what you might call—a friend."

"Bill didn't have any friends," she said bitterly. "Only an aunt, that's all. Except for her, he said, there wasn't a soul in England who would have walked around the block to help him."

Captain Anstruther looked depressed.

"He was wrong," he said. "He was wrong."

"Of course the trouble with Bill was that he drank," she said.

"Oh, he did everything," assented the Captain comprehensively.

"He's on the water-wagon, now," she remarked. "Been there for a year and a half. Is going to stay, too."

"Water-wagon?" inquired the Captain; "is that the vernacular for—"

"I mean I have reformed him," she explained. "I guess you wouldn't know Bill now. He has money in the bank and drinks coffee with his meals!"

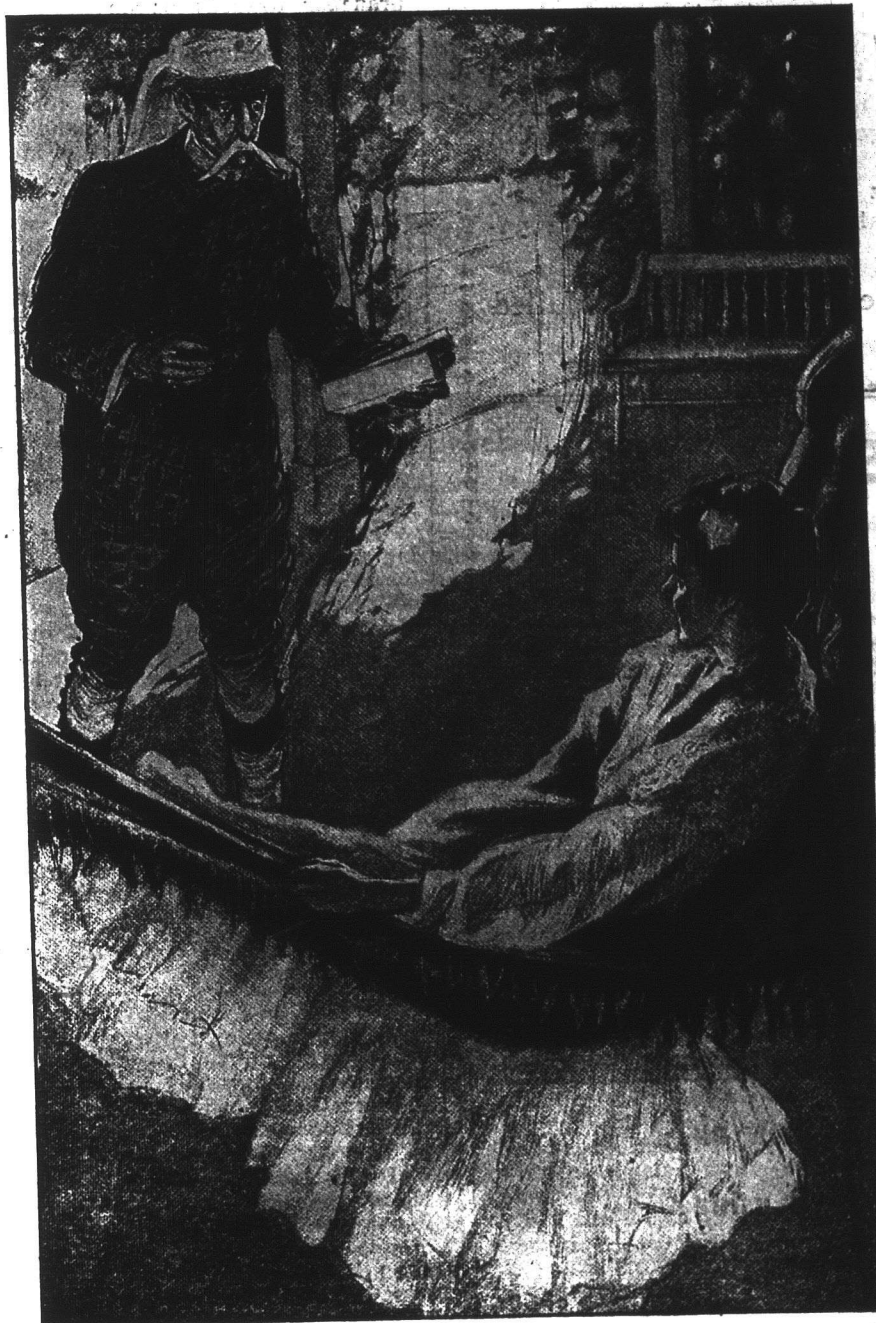
The Captain looked more depressed than ever.

"I suppose we ought all to thank you," he said. "Yes, indeed, we are very grateful to you."

"I don't want you to think I am just a little angel," she went on, "or that I go around radiating reform like a lawn sprinkler sprinkling. I am quite a believer in letting people mind their own business. But you see, in this case Bill brought it on his own head."

"That's where he usually brought things," said the Captain. "Often pretty hard too."

"He never was a nipping kind of a man, thank goodness," she said, "but he used to go off on what Pa called a biennial bust. He had been here for five months, and a perfect pattern, before we got on to it. Pa at last made him the Dago foreman, you know, and we were really beginning to think we had found our long-lost child. He was always so polite, you know, and hard-working and reliable; and he just snuggled into the place like a dog that's followed you home. Pa said it was all too good to be true and I guess Pa was right, for one hot Sunday afternoon a man came running in to say that Bill was fighting drunk and was waltzing around the yard with a pistol to shoot Mr. Jackson with, our chemist, you know, and expert wine-maker—and that he was drawing beads on anybody that tried to stop him. Even while he was talking we heard bang, bang, bang out there and Mr. Jackson came pelting in like a jack-rabbit—not a bit hurt, you know—but like a person on a sinking ship wanting to catch the last boat. I started upstairs to get under the bed, but I hadn't got up a step before I saw Pa reaching for his Winchester and pinning his deputy sheriff badge on the lapel of his coat. I knew that was the end of Bill, and it came over me that I couldn't bear to have him killed—he was too big and splendid to be shot down like a dog, and anyhow, I had never liked Jackson since he had tried to kiss me once at a dance—and



"I pride myself on being a man of the world, but positively, for once, I felt myself staggered."

"Then you'd better chase him up to Byron," remarked the young lady.

"But you're in it too," explained Anstruther. "It's really more you than anybody. I've come from England just to see you!"

"Me!" she cried.

"Yes, you," said the Captain.

"Then what do you want Pa for," she demanded.

"I thought it would be better to lay it before him first," he returned.

"You'd better begin with me," she said.

"That is, if you want to get anywhere. I have Pa in my pocket, as politicians say."

"Haven't you a man employed here called Gray?" he inquired. "An Englishman like myself—a gentleman—though he fills, I understand, rather a subordinate position?"

"Oh, yes," she said, "only he's mostly called Bill, you know. I should say he is here. Very much here, indeed!"

The Captain did not suffer from such a mute interrogation and his straight honest gaze reassured her. Something about him was indefinitely reminiscent of Bill.

"You must be related to him," she said.

"That is why I am here," he returned gravely. "That is why I want you to tell me everything."

"When he first blew in here," said the girl, "he was the most forlorn, hopeless, tattered thing you ever saw. Ah Sue gave him something to eat on the doorstep—Ah Sue has a heart like melted butter, you know—and I happened to be passing through the kitchen and saw him there. Do you know what he said to me, sticking his eye-glass in his eye and speaking with his mouth full of chicken tamale? Said he understood now why pigs squealed when they ate! If he hadn't said that I suppose he'd have gone away and that would have been the