

## Miss Cayley's Adventures.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

### VIII.—THE ADVENTURE OF THE PEA-GREEN PATRICIAN.



WAY to India! A life on the ocean wave once more; and—may it prove less wavy!

In plain prose, my arrangement with "my proprietor," Mr. Elworthy (thus we speak in the newspaper trade), included a trip to Bombay for myself and Elsie. So, as soon as we had drained Upper Egypt journalistically dry, we returned to Cairo on our road to Suez. I am glad to say, my letters to the *Daily Telephone* gave satisfaction. My employer wrote, "You are a born journalist." I confess this surprised me; for I have always considered myself a truthful person. Still, as he evidently meant it for praise, I took the doubtful compliment in good part, and offered no remonstrance.

I have a mercurial temperament. My spirits rise and fall as if they were Consols. Monotonous Egypt depressed me, as it depressed the Israelites; but the passage of the Red Sea set me sounding my timbrel. I love fresh air; I love the sea, if the sea will but behave itself; and I positively revelled in the change from Egypt.

Unfortunately, we had taken our passages by a P. and O. steamer from Suez to Bombay many weeks beforehand, so as to secure good berths; and still more unfortunately, in a letter to Lady Georgina, I had chanced to mention the name of our ship and the date of the voyage. I kept up a spasmodic correspondence with Lady Georgina nowadays—tuppence-ha'penny a fortnight; the dear, cantankerous, racy old lady had been the foundation of my fortunes, and I was

genuinely grateful to her; or, rather, I ought to say, she had been their second foundress, for I will do myself the justice to admit that the first was my own initiative and enterprise. I flatter myself I have the knack of taking the tide on the turn, and I am justly proud of it. But, being a grateful animal, I wrote once a fortnight to report progress to Lady Georgina. Besides—let me whisper—strictly between ourselves—'twas an indirect way of hearing about Harold.

This time, however, as events turned out, I recognised that I had made a grave mistake in confiding my movements to my shrewd old lady. She did not betray me on purpose, of course; but I gathered later that casually in conversation she must have mentioned the fact and date of my sailing before somebody who ought to have had no concern in it; and the somebody, I found, had governed himself accordingly. All this, however, I only discovered afterwards. So, without anticipating, I will narrate the facts exactly as they occurred to me.

When we mounted the gangway of the *Jumna* at Suez, and began the process of frizzling down the Red Sea, I noted on deck almost at once an odd-looking young man of twenty-two or thereabouts, with a curious faint pea-green complexion. He was the wishy-washest young man I ever beheld in my life; an achromatic study: in spite of the delicate pea-greenness of his skin, all the colouring matter of the body seemed somehow to have faded out of him. Perhaps he had been bleached. As he



"AN ODD-LOOKING YOUNG MAN."

leant over the taffrail, gazing down with open mouth and vacant stare at the water, I took a good long look at him. He interested me much—because he was so exceptionally uninteresting; a pallid, anæmic, indefinite hobbledehoy, with a high, narrow forehead, and sketchy features. He had watery, restless eyes of an insipid light blue; thin, yellow hair, almost white in its paleness; and twitching hands that played nervously all the time with a shadowy moustache. This shadowy moustache seemed to absorb as a rule the best part of his attention; it was so sparse and so blanched that he felt it continually—to assure himself, no doubt, of the reality of its existence. I need hardly add that he wore an eye-glass.

He was an aristocrat, I felt sure; Eton and Christ Church; no ordinary person could have been quite so flavourless. Imbecility like his is only to be attained as the result of long and judicious selection.

He went on gazing in a vacant way at the water below, an ineffectual patrician smile playing feebly round the corners of his mouth meanwhile. Then he turned and stared at me as I lay back in my deck-chair. For a minute he looked me over as if I were a horse for sale. When he had finished inspecting me, he beckoned to somebody at the far end of the quarter-deck.

The somebody sidled up with a deferential air which confirmed my belief in the pea-green young man's aristocratic origin. It was such deference as the British flunkey pays only to blue blood; for he has gradations of flunkeydom. He is respectful to wealth; polite to acquired rank; but servile only to hereditary nobility. Indeed, you can make a rough guess at the social status of the person he addresses by observing which one of his twenty-seven nicely graduated manners he adopts in addressing him.

The pea-green young man glanced over in my direction, and murmured something to the satellite, whose back was turned towards me. I felt sure, from his attitude, he was asking whether I was the person he suspected me to be. The satellite nodded assent, whereat the pea-green young man, screwing up his face to fix his eye-glass, stared harder than ever. He must be heir to a peerage, I felt convinced; nobody short of that rank would consider himself entitled to stare with such frank unconcern at an unknown lady.

Presently it further occurred to me that the satellite's back seemed strangely familiar. "I have seen that man somewhere, Elsie," I

whispered, putting aside the wisps of hair that blew about my face.

"So have I, dear," Elsie answered, with a slight shudder. And I was instinctively aware that I too disliked him.

As Elsie spoke, the man turned, and strolled slowly past us, with that ineffable insolence which is the other side of the flunkey's insufferable self-abasement. He cast a glance at us as he went by, a withering glance of brazen effrontery. We knew him now, of course: it was that variable star, our old acquaintance, Mr. Higginson the courier.

He was here as himself this time; no longer the count or the mysterious faith-healer. The diplomat hid his rays under the garb of the man-servant.

"Depend upon it, Elsie," I cried, clutching her arm with a vague sense of fear, "this man means mischief. There is danger ahead. When a creature of Higginson's sort, who has risen to be a count and a fashionable physician, descends again to be a courier, you may rest assured it is because he has something to gain by it. He has some deep scheme afloat. And *we* are part of it."

"His master looks weak enough and silly enough for anything," Elsie answered, eyeing the suspected lordling. "I should think he is just the sort of man such a wily rogue would naturally fasten upon."

"When a wily rogue gets hold of a weak fool, who is also dishonest," I said, "the two together may make a formidable combination. But never mind. We're forewarned. I think I shall be even with him."

That evening, at dinner in the saloon, the pea-green young man strolled in with a jaunty air and took his seat next to us. The Red Sea, by the way, was kinder than the Mediterranean: it allowed us to dine from the very first evening. Cards had been laid on the plates to mark our places. I glanced at my neighbour's. It bore the inscription, "Viscount Southminster."

That was the name of Lord Kynaston's eldest son—Lady Georgina's nephew; Harold Tillington's cousin! So *this* was the man who might possibly inherit Mr. Marmaduke Ashurst's money! I remembered now how often and how fervently Lady Georgina had said, "Kynaston's sons are all fools." If the rest came up to sample, I was inclined to agree with her.

It also flashed across me that Lord Southminster might have heard through Higginson of our meeting with Mr. Marmaduke Ashurst at Florence, and of my acquaintance with Harold Tillington at

Schlungenbad and Lungern. With a woman's instinct, I jumped at the fact that the pea-green young man had taken passage by this boat, on purpose to baffle both me and Harold.

Thinking it over, it seemed to me, too, that he might have various possible points of view on the matter. He might desire, for example, that Harold should marry me, under the impression that his marriage with a penniless outsider would annoy his uncle; for the pea-green young man doubtless thought that I was still to Mr. Ashurst just that dreadful adventuress. If so, his obvious cue would be to promote a good understanding between Harold and myself, in order to make us marry, so that the urbane old gentleman might then disinherit his favourite nephew, and make a new will in Lord Southminster's interest. Or again, the pea-green young man might, on the contrary, be aware that Mr.

Ashurst and I had got on admirably together when we met at Florence; in which case his aim would naturally be to find out something that might set the rich uncle against me. Yet once more, he might merely have heard that I had drawn up Uncle Marmaduke's will at the office, and he might desire to

worm the contents of it out of me. Which ever was his design, I resolved to be upon my guard in every word I said to him, and leave no door open to any trickery either way. For of one thing I felt sure, that the colourless young man had torn himself away from the mud-honey of Piccadilly for this voyage to India only because he had heard there was a chance of meeting me.

That was a politic move, whoever planned it—himself or Higginson; for a week on board ship with a person or persons is the very best chance of getting thrown in with them; whether they like it or lump it, they can't easily avoid you.

It was while I was pondering these things in my mind, and resolving with myself not to give myself away, that the young man with the pea-green face lounged in and dropped into the next seat to me. He was dressed

(amongst other things) in a dinner jacket and a white tie; for myself, I detest such fopperies on board ship; they seem to me out of place: they conflict with the infinite possibilities of the situation. One stands too near the realities of things. Evening dress and *mal-de-mer* sort ill together.

As my neighbour sat down, he turned to me with an inane smile which occupied all his face. "Good evening," he said, in a baronial drawl. "Miss Cayley, I gathah? I asked the skippah's leave to set next yah. We ought to be friends—rathah. I think yah know my poor deah old aunt, Lady Georgina Fawley."

I bowed a somewhat freezing bow. "Lady Georgina is one of my dearest friends," I answered.

"No, really? Poor deah old Georgey! Got somebody to stick up for her at last, has she? Now, that's what I call chivalrous of



"HE TURNED TO ME WITH AN INANE SMILE."

yah. Magnanimous, isn't it? I like to see people stick up for their friends. And it must be a novelty for Georgey. For between you and me, a moah cantankerous, spiteful, acidulated old cough-drop than the poor deah soul it 'ud be difficult to hit upon."

"Lady Georgina has brains," I answered; "and they enable her to recognise a fool when she sees him. I will admit that she does not suffer fools gladly."

He turned to me with a sudden, sharp look in the depths of the lack-lustre eyes. Already it began to strike me that, though the pea-green young man was inane, he had his due proportion of a certain insidious practical cunning. "That's true," he answered, measuring me. "And according to her, almost everybody's a fool—especially her relations. There's a fine knack of sweeping generalization about deah skinny

old Georgey. The few people she really likes are all archangels; the rest are blithering idiots; there's no middle course with her."

I held my peace frigidly.

"She thinks me a very special and peculiar fool," he went on, crumbling his bread.

"Lady Georgina," I answered, "is a person of exceptional discrimination. I would almost always accept her judgment on anyone as practically final."

He laid down his soup-spoon, fondled the imperceptible moustache with his tapering fingers, and then broke once more into a cheerful expanse of smile which reminded me of nothing so much as of the village idiot. It spread over his face as the splash from a stone spreads over a mill-pond. "Now that's a nice cheerful sort of thing to say to a fellah," he ejaculated, fixing his eye-glass in his eye, with a few fierce contortions of his facial muscles. "That's encouraging, don't yah know, as the foundation of an acquaintance. Makes a good cornah-stone. Calculated to place things at once upon what yah call a friendly basis. Georgey said you had a pretty wit; I see now why she admiahed it. Birds of a feathah: very wise old proverb."

I reflected that, after all, this young man had nothing overt against him, beyond a fishy blue eye and an inane expression; so, feeling that I had, perhaps, gone a little too far, I continued, after a minute, "And your uncle, how is he?"

"Marmy?" he inquired, with another elephantine smile; and then I perceived it was a form of humour with him (or rather, a cheap substitute) to speak of his elder relations by their abbreviated Christian names, without any prefix. "Marmy's doing very well, thank yah; as well as could be expected. In fact, bettah. Habakkuk on the brain: it's carrying him off at last. He has Bright's disease very bad—drank port, don't yah know—and won't trouble this wicked world much longah with his presence. It will be a happy release—especially for his nephews."

I was really grieved, for I had grown to like the urbane old gentleman, as I had grown to like the cantankerous old lady. In spite of his fussiness and his Stock Exchange views on the interpretation of Scripture, his genuine kindness and his real liking for me had softened my heart to him; and my face must have shown my distress, for the pea-green young man added quickly with an after-thought: "But *you* needn't be afraid, yah

know. It's all right for Harold Tillington. You ought to know that as well as anyone—and bettah: for it was you who drew up his will for him at Florence."

I flushed crimson, I believe. Then he knew all about me! "I was not asking on Mr. Tillington's account," I answered. "I asked because I have a personal feeling of friendship for your uncle, Mr. Ashurst."

His hand strayed up to the straggling yellow hairs on his upper lip once more, and he smiled again, this time with a curious under-current of foolish craftiness. "That's a good one," he answered. "Georgey told me you were original. Marmy's a millionaire, and many people love millionaires for their money. But to love Marmy for himself—I do call that originality! Why, weight for age, he's acknowledged to be the most portentous old boah in London society!"

"I like Mr. Ashurst because he has a kind heart and some genuine instincts," I answered. "He has not allowed all human feeling to be replaced by a cheap mask of Pall Mall cynicism."

"Oh, I say; how's that for preaching? Don't you manage to give it hot to a fellah, neithah! And at sight, too, without the usual three days of grace. Have some of my champagne? I'm a forgiving creechah."

"No, thank you. I prefer this hock."

"Your friend, then?" And he motioned the steward to pass the bottle.

To my great disgust, Elsie held out her glass. I was annoyed at that. It showed she had missed the drift of our conversation, and was therefore lacking in feminine intuition. I should be sorry if I had allowed the higher mathematics to kill out in me the most distinctively womanly faculty.

From that first day forth, however, in spite of this beginning, Lord Southminster almost persecuted me with his persistent attentions. He did all a fellah could possibly do to please me. I could not make out precisely what he was driving at; but I saw he had some artful game of his own to play, and that he was playing it subtly. I also saw that, vapid as he was, his vapidness did not prevent him from being worldly wise with the wisdom of the self-seeking man of the world, who utterly distrusts and disbelieves in all the higher emotions of humanity. He harped so often on this string that on our second day out, as we lolled on deck in the heat, I had to rebuke him sharply. He had been sneering for some hours. "There are two kinds of silly simplicity, Lord Southminster," I said, at last.

"One kind is the silly simplicity of the rustic who trusts everybody; the other kind is the silly simplicity of the Pall Mall clubman who trusts nobody. It is just as foolish and just as one-sided to overlook the good as to overlook the evil in humanity. If you trust everyone, you are likely to be taken in; but if you trust no one, you put yourself at a serious practical disadvantage, besides losing half the joy of living."

"Then you think me a fool, like Georgey?" he broke out.

"I should never be rude enough to say so," I answered, fanning myself.

"Weil, you're what I call a first-rate companion for a voyage down the Red Sea," he put in, gazing abstractedly at the awnings. "Such a lovely freezing mixture! A fellah doesn't need ices when *you're* on tap. I recommend you as a refrigeratah."

"I am glad," I answered, demurely, "if I have secured your approbation in that humble capacity. I'm sure I have tried hard for it."

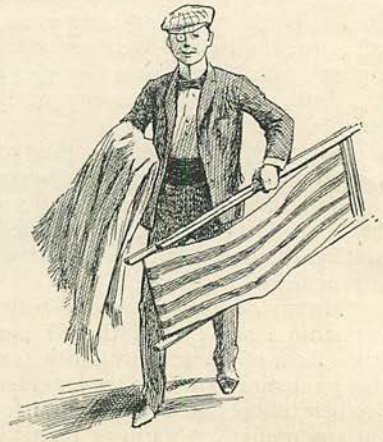
Yet nothing that I could say seemed to put the man down. In spite of rebuffs, he was assiduous in running down the companion-ladder for my parasol or my smelling-bottle; he fetched me chairs; he stayed me with cushions; he offered to lend me books; he pestered me to drink his wine; and he kept Elsie in champagne, which she annoyed me by accepting. Poor dear Elsie clearly failed to understand the creature. "He's so kind and polite, Brownie, isn't he?" she would observe, in her simple fashion. "Do you know, I think he's taken quite a fancy to you! And he'll be an earl by-and-by. I call it romantic. How lovely it would seem, dear, to see you a countess."

"Elsie," I said, severely, with one hand on her arm, "you are a dear little soul, and I am very fond of you; but if you think I could sell myself for a coronet to a pasty-faced young man with a pea-green complexion and glassy blue eyes—I can only say, my child, you have misread my character. He isn't a man: he's a lump of putty!"

I think Elsie was quite shocked that I should apply these terms to a courtesy lord, the eldest son of a peer. Nature had

endowed her with the profound British belief that peers should be spoken of in choice and peculiar language. "If a peer's a fool," Lady Georgina said once to me, "people think you should say his temperament does not fit him for the conduct of affairs: if he's a roué or a drunkard, they think you should say he has unfortunate weaknesses."

What most of all convinced me, however, that the wishy-washy young man with the pea-green complexion must be playing some stealthy game, was the demeanour and mental attitude of Mr. Higginson, his courier. After the first day, Higginson appeared to be politeness and deference itself to us. He behaved to us both, *almost* as if we belonged to the titled classes. He treated us with the second best of his twenty-seven graduated manners. He fetched and carried for us with a courtly grace which recalled that distinguished diplomat, the Comte de Larochette.



"NOTHING SEEMED TO PUT THE MAN DOWN."

sur-Loiret, at the station at Malines with Lady Georgina. It is true, at his politest moments, I often caught the under-current of a wicked twinkle in his eye, and felt sure he was doing it all with some profound motive. But his external demeanour was everything that one could desire from a well-trained man-servant; I could hardly believe it was the same man who had growled to me at Florence, "I shall be even with you yet," as he left our office.

"Do you know, Brownie," Elsie mused once, "I really begin to think we must have

misjudged Higginson. He's so extremely polite. Perhaps, after all, he is really a count, who has been exiled and impoverished for his political opinions."

I smiled and held my tongue. Silence costs nothing. But Mr. Higginson's political opinions, I felt sure, were of that simple communistic sort which the law in its blunt way calls fraudulent. They consisted in a belief that all was his which he could lay his hands on.

"Higginson's a splendid fellow for his place, yah know, Miss Cayley," Lord Southminster said to me one evening as we were approaching Aden. "What I like about him is, he's so doosid intelligent."

"Extremely so," I answered. Then the devil entered into me again. "He had the doosid intelligence even to take in Lady Georgina."

"Yaas; that's just it, don't you know. Georgey told me that story. Screamingly funny, wasn't it? And I said to myself at once, 'Higginson's the man for me. I want a courier with jolly lots of brains and no blooming scruples. I'll entice this chap away from Marmy.' And I did. I outbid Marmy. Oh, yaas, he's a first-rate fellow, Higginson. What I want is a man who will do what he's told, and ask no beastly unpleasant questions. Higginson's that man. He's as sharp as a ferret."

"And as dishonest as they make them."

He opened his hands with a gesture of unconcern. "All the bettah for my purpose.

See how frank I am, Miss Cayley. I tell the truth. The truth is very rare. You ought to respect me for it."

"It depends somewhat upon the *kind* of truth," I answered, with a random shot. "I don't respect a man, for instance, for confessing to a forgery."

He winced. Not for months after did I know how a stone thrown at a venture had chanced to hit the spot, and had vastly enhanced his opinion of my cleverness.

"You have heard about Dr. Fortescue-Langley too, I suppose?" I went on.

"Oh, yaas. Wasn't it real jam? He did the doctor-trick on a lady in Switzerland. And the way he has come it ovah deah simple old Marmy! He played Marmy with Ezekiel! Not so dusty, was it? He's too lovely for anything!"

"He's an edged tool," I said.

"Yaas; that's why I use him."

"And edged tools may cut the user's fingers."

"Not mine," he answered, taking out a cigarette. "Oh, deah, no. He can't turn against *me*. He wouldn't dare to. Yah see, I have the fellow entirely in my powah. I know all his little games, and I can expose him any day. But it suits me to keep him. I don't mind telling yah, since I respect your intellect, that he and I are engaged in pulling off a big *coup* togethah. If it were not for that, I wouldn't be heah. Yah don't catch me going away so fah from Newmarket and the Empire for nothing."



"YAH DON'T CATCH ME GOING SO FAH FROM NEWMARKET."

"I judged as much," I answered. And then I was silent.

But I wondered to myself why the neutral-tinted young man should be so communicative to an obviously hostile stranger.

For the next few days it amused me to see how hard our lordling tried to suit his conversation to myself and Elsie. He was absurdly anxious to humour us. Just at first, it is true, he had discussed the subjects that lay nearest to his own heart. He was an ardent votary of the noble quadruped; and he loved the turf—whose sward, we judged, he trod mainly at Tattersall's. He spoke to us with erudition on "two-year-old form," and gave us several "safe things" for the spring handicaps. The Oaks he considered "a moral" for Clorinda. He also retailed certain choice anecdotes about ladies whose Christian names were chiefly Tottie and Flo, and whose honoured surnames have escaped my memory. Most of them flourished, I recollect, at the Frivolity Music Hall. But when he learned that our interest in the noble quadruped was scarcely more than tepid, and that we had never even visited "the Friv.," as he affectionately called it, he did his best in turn to acquire our subjects. He had heard us talk about Florence, for example, and he gathered from our talk that we loved its art treasures. So he set himself to work to be studiously artistic. It was a beautiful study in human ineptitude. "Ah, yaas," he murmured, turning up the pale blue eyes ecstatically towards the mast-head. "Chawming place, Florence! I dote on the pickchahs. I know them all by heart. I assuah yah, I've spent houahs and houahs feeding my soul in the galleries."

"And what particular painter does your soul most feed upon?" I asked, bluntly, with a smile.

The question staggered him. I could see him hunting through the vacant chambers of his brain for a Florentine painter. Then a faint light gleamed in the leaden eyes, and he fingered the straw-coloured moustache with that nervous hand till he almost put a visible point upon it. "Ah, Raphael?" he said, tentatively, with an inquiring air, yet beaming at his success. "Don't you think so? Splendid artist, Raphael!"

"And a very safe guess," I answered, leading him on. "You can't go far wrong in mentioning Raphael, can you? But after him?"

He dived into the recesses of his memory again, peered about him for a minute or two, and brought back nothing. "I can't remem-

bah the othah fellahs' names," he went on; "they're all so much alike: all in *elli*, don't yah know; but I recollect at the time they impressed me awfully."

"No doubt," I answered.

He tried to look through me, and failed. Then he plunged like a noble sportsman that he was on a second fetch of memory. "Ah—and Michael Angelo," he went on, quite proud of his treasure-trove. "Sweet things, Michael Angelo's!"

"Very sweet," I admitted. "So simple; so touching; so tender; so domestic!"

I thought Elsie would explode; but she kept her countenance. The pea-green young man gazed at me uneasily. He had half an idea by this time that I was making game of him.

However, he fished up a name once more, and clutched at it. "Savonarola, too," he adventured. "I adore Savonarola. His pickchahs are beautiful."

"And so rare!" Elsie murmured.

"Then there is Fra Diavolo?" I suggested, going one better. "How do you like Fra Diavolo?"

He seemed to have heard the name before, but still he hesitated. "Ah—what did he paint?" he asked, with growing caution.

I stuffed him valiantly. "Those charming angels, you know," I answered. "With the roses and the glories!"

"Oh, yaas; I recollect. All askew, aren't they; like this! I remembah them very well. But—" a doubt flitted across his brain, "wasn't his name Fra Angelico?"

"His brother," I replied, casting truth to the winds. "They worked together, you must have heard. One did the saints; the other did the opposite. Division of labour, don't you see; Fra Angelico, Fra Diavolo."

He fingered his cigarette with a dubious hand, and wriggled his eye-glass tighter. "Yaas, beautiful; beautiful! But—" growing suspicious apace, "wasn't Fra Diavolo also a composah?"

"Of course," I assented. "In his off time, he composed. Those early Italians—so versatile, you see; so versatile!"

He had his doubts, but he suppressed them.

"And Torricelli," I went on, with a side glance at Elsie, who was choking by this time. "And Chianti, and Frittura, and Cinquevalli, and Giulio Romano."

His distrust increased. "Now you're trying to make me commit myself," he drawled out. "I remembah Torricelli—he's the fellah who used to paint all his women



"WASN'T FRA DIAVOLO ALSO A COMPOSAH?"

crooked. But Chianti's a wine; I've often drunk it; and Romano's—well, every fellah knows Romano's is a restaurant near the Gaiety Theatre."

"Besides," I continued, in a drawl like his own, "there are Risotto, and Gnocchi, and Vermicelli, and Anchovy—all famous paintahs, and all of whom I don't doubt you admiah."

Elsie exploded at last. But he took no offence. He smiled inanely, as if he rather enjoyed it. "Look heah, you know," he said, with his crafty smile; "that's one too much. I'm not taking any. You think yourselves very clevah for kidding me with paintahs who are really macaroni and cheese and claret; yet if I were to tell you the Lejah was run at Ascot, or the Cesarewitch at Doncastah, why, you'd be no wisah. When it comes to art, I don't have a look in: but I could tell you a thing or two about starting prices."

And I was forced to admit that there he had reason.

Still, I think he realized that he had better avoid the subject of art in future, as we avoided the noble quadruped. He saw his limitations.

Not till the last evening before we reached Bombay did I really understand the nature of my neighbour's project. That evening, as it chanced, Elsie had a headache and went below early. I stopped with her till she dozed off; then I slipped up on deck once more for a breath of fresh air, before retiring for the night to the hot and stuffy cabins. It was an exquisite evening. The moon rode in the pale green sky of the tropics. A strange

Vol. xvi.—51.

light still lingered on the western horizon. The stifling heat of the Red Sea had given way long since to the refreshing coolness of the Indian Ocean. I strolled awhile on the quarter-deck, and sat down at last near the stern. Next moment, I was aware of somebody creeping up to me.

"Look heah, Miss Cayley," a voice broke in; "I'm in luck at last! I've been waiting, oh, evah so long, for this opportunity."

I turned and faced him. "Have you, indeed?" I answered. "Well, I have *not*, Lord Southminster."

I tried to rise, but he motioned me back to my chair. There were ladies on deck, and to avoid being noticed I sank into my seat again.

"I want to speak to you," he went on, in a voice that (for him) was almost impressive. "Half a mo, Miss Cayley. I want to say—this last night—you misunderstand me."

"On the contrary," I answered, "the trouble is—that I understand you perfectly."

"No, yah don't. Look heah." He bent forward quite romantically. "I'm going to be perfectly frank. Of course yah know that when I came on board this ship I came—to checkmate yah."

"Of course," I replied. "Why else should you and Higginson have bothered to come here?"

He rubbed his hands together. "That's just it.—You're always clevah. You hit it first shot. But there's wheah the point comes in. At first, I only thought of how we could circumvent yah. I treated yah as the enemy. Now, it's all the othah way. Miss Cayley;



you're the cleverest woman I evah met in this world; you extort my admiration!"

I could not repress a smile. I didn't know how it was, but I could see I possessed some mysterious attraction for the Ashurst family. I was fatal to Ashursts. Lady Georgina, Harold Tillington, the Honourable Marmaduke, Lord Southminster—different types as they were, all succumbed without one blow to me.

"You flatter me," I answered, coldly.

"No, I don't," he cried, flashing his cuffs, and gazing affectionately at his sleeve-links. "'Pon my soul, I assuah yah, I mean it. I can't tell you how much I admiah yah. I admiah your intellect. Every day I have seen yah, I feel it moah and moah. Why, you're the only person who has evah out-flanked my fellah, Higginson. As a rule, I don't think much of women. I've been through several London seasons, and lots of 'em have tried their level best to catch me; the cleverest mammas have been aftah me for their Ethels. But I wasn't so easily caught: I dodged the Ethels. With you, it's different. I feel"—he paused—"you're a woman a fellah might be really proud of."

"You are too kind," I answered, in my refrigerator voice.

"Well, will you take me?" he asked, trying to seize my hand. "Miss Cayley, if you will, you will make me unspeakably happy."

It was a great effort—for him—and I was sorry to crush it. "I regret," I said, "that I am compelled to deny you unspeakable happiness."

"Oh, but you don't catch on. You mistake. Let me explain. You're backing the othah man. Now, I happen to know about that: and I assuah you, it's an error. Take my word for it, you're staking your money on the wrong fellah."

"I do not

understand you," I replied, drawing away from his approach. "And what is more, I may add, you could never understand me."

"Yaas, but I do. I understand perfectly. I can see where you go wrong. You drew up Marmy's will; and you think Marmy has left all he's worth to Harold Tillington; so you're putting every penny you've got on Harold. Well, that's mere moonshine. Harold may think it's all right; but it's not all right. There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the Probate Court. Listen heah, Miss Cayley: Higginson and I are a jolly sight sharpah than your friend Harold. Harold's what they call a clevah fellah in society, and I'm what they call a fool; but I know bettah than Harold which side of my bread's buttahed."

"I don't doubt it," I answered.

"Well, I have managed this business. I don't mind telling you now, I had a telegram from Marmy's valet when we touched at Aden; and poor old Marmy's sinking. Habakkuk's been too much for him. Sixteen stone going under. Why am I not with him? yah may ask. Because, when a man of Marmy's temperament is dying, it's safah to be away from him. There's plenty of time for Marmy to atah his will yet—and there are othah contingencies. Still, Harold's



"TAKE MY WORD FOR IT, YOU'RE STAKING YOUR MONEY ON THE WRONG FELLAH."

quite out of it. You take my word for it : if you back Harold, you back a man who's not going to get anything ; while if you back me, you back the winnah, with a coronet into the bargain." And he smiled fatuously.

I looked at him with a look that would have made a wiser man wince. But it fell flat on Lord Southminster. "Do you know why I do not rise and go down to my cabin at once?" I said, slowly. "Because, if I did, somebody as I passed might see my burning cheeks—cheeks flushed with shame at your insulting proposal—and might guess that you had asked me, and that I had refused you. And I should shrink from the disgrace of anyone's knowing that you had put such a humiliation upon me. You have been frank with me—after your kind, Lord Southminster; frank with the frankness of a low and purely commercial nature. I will be frank with you in turn. You are right in supposing that I love Harold Tillington—a man whose name I hate to mention in your presence. But you are wrong in supposing that the disposition of Mr. Marmaduke Ashurst's money has or can have anything to do with the feelings I entertain towards him. I would marry him all the sooner if he were poor and penniless. You cannot *understand* that state of mind, of course : but you must be content to *accept* it. And I would not marry *you* if there were no other man left in the world to marry. I should as soon think of marrying a lump of dough." I faced him, all crimson. "Is *that* plain enough? Do you see now that I really mean it?"

He gazed at me with a curious look, and twirled what he considered his moustache once more, quite airily. The man was imperturbable—a pachydermatous imbecile. "You're all wrong, yah know," he said, after a long pause, during which he had regarded me through his eye-glass as if I were a specimen of some rare new species. "You're all wrong, and yah won't believe me. But I tell yah, I know what I'm talking about. You think it's quite safe about Marmy's money—that he's left it to Harold, because you drew the will up. I assuah you that will's not worth the paper it's written on. You fancy Harold's a hot favourite : he's a

rank outsiders. I give you a chance, and you won't take it. I want yah because you're a remarkable woman. Most of the Ethels cry when they're trying to make a fellah propose to 'em ; and I don't like 'em damp : but *you* have some go about yah. You insist upon backing the wrong man. But you'll find your mistake out yet." A bright idea struck him. "I say—why don't you hedge? Leave it open till Marmy's gone, and then marry the winnah?"

It was hopeless trying to make this clod understand. His brain was not built with the right cells for understanding me. "Lord Southminster," I said, turning upon him, and clasping my hands, "I will not go away while you stop here. But you have some spark enough of a gentleman in your composition, I hope, not to inflict your company any longer upon a woman who does not desire it. I ask you to leave me here alone. When you have gone, and I have had time to recover from your degrading offer, I may, perhaps, feel able to go down to my cabin."

He stared at me with open blue eyes—those watery blue eyes. "Oh, just as you like," he answered. "I wanted to do you a good turn, because you're the only woman I evah really admiahed—to say admiah, don't you know; not trotted round like the Ethels : but you won't allow me. I'll go if you wish it ; though I tell you again, you're backing the wrong man, and soonah or latah you'll discover it. I don't mind laying you six to four against him. Howevah, I'll do one thing for yah : I'll leave this offah always open. I'm not likely to marry any othah woman—not good enough, is it?—and if evah you find out you're mistaken about Harold Tillington, remembah, honour bright, I shall be ready at any time to renew my offah."

By this time, I was at boiling point. I could not find words to answer him. I waved him away angrily with one hand. He raised his hat with quite a jaunty air and strolled off forward, puffing his cigarette. I don't think he even knew the disgust with which he inspired me.

I sat some hours with the cool air playing about my burning cheeks before I mustered up courage to rise and go down below again.