



THE GREAT CALIFORNIAN HEIRESS.

BY GRANT ALLEN.



DO sit up by the fire and talk with me, May, dear. I've got a fancy to tell you a story about something that once happened to me. Generally speaking, we American women don't want to get confidential with you English girls, somehow. You seem so official; you kind of shut one up, as if one were a concertina. But *you*—you're different. From the moment I first saw you, I felt like telling you almost anything, any way.

It's just about those jewels of mine. Your Poppa was talking of them. When he asked me at dinner whether I wasn't afraid of ever having them stolen, and I answered, "Oh, my, no," you looked across at me quite curious. And I know I blushed. And you wondered what I did it for. Well, that made me want, somehow, to make a clean breast of it and tell you all about my burglar.

It was when I was staying in the country with Lady Cowperthwaite. Her husband was in the Indian General way, I fancy; or perhaps he was one of your Colonial Governors; I never *can* remember what each particular person in your country gets knighted for. Anyway, Lady Cowperthwaite is one of those folks who advertise in the *Times*: "A lady of title, moving in the very

highest circles, would receive into her house an American lady of good social position, as a Paying Guest. References given and required. Address, in strict confidence, Lady C., Jones's Governess Agency, 999, Piccadilly, W." That's the sort of thing, you know. She charges you fifteen guineas a week for your board, and introduces you for the change to English society.

Well, I was fresh from California then, and everybody in England had heard that Poppa was the richest man in the southern section of the State, so I was soon pretty popular. In short, my dear, I was the fact of the season. Everybody talked of me, but especially of my diamonds. If I'd cared to let them, more than one of your peers would have married those diamonds. Elder sons were nuts upon them. But I'm Californian, don't you see, and I suppose you English girls would call me romantic; any way, I didn't feel to want a blessed one of those peers; I had a sort of notion the peers were more dead stuck on the diamonds themselves than on the girl that wore them. That put me off, of course; for an American woman likes to be taken for herself, not for her real estate or her family jewellery.

At the end of the season, when London began to thin, Lady Cowperthwaite observed

we must do the right thing, and pay a round of visits at country houses. Well, I wanted to do the right thing while I was about it, of course—I was paying my money for it; so I let Lady Cowperthwaite walk me off like a lamb, wherever she'd a mind to. That suited Lady Cowperthwaite down to the ground, you must know: because, with me and my diamonds in tow, she got invited everywhere; and, as I handed her over her fifteen guineas a week, in town or country, board or visit, why, she was pretty pleased, you may be sure, to trundle me off to her fine acquaintances. She was glad I hadn't taken a fancy, my first season, to any of her marquises; it was a mutual convenience. It suited me to pay her fifteen guineas a week for chaperoning me about through the English aristocracy, and it suited her to pocket fifteen guineas a week for being asked to houses she'd never have entered but for the American heiress and her diamond necklace. I tell you there were no flies on Lady Cowperthwaite.

About the third visit we paid was to a country house down in the hills in Hampshire. They had laid on a courtesy lord specially on my account, a duke's youngest son, with an eye to the diamonds. For the first three days I felt rather bored. Everybody about the place seemed so painfully conscious that Poppa was the biggest holder of Sacramento Southerners in the State of California. And it was dull—oh, dull—my dear, you know your aristocratic fellow-countrywomen! But the third night an incident occurred that lightened the gloom a bit. I had an interesting episode with a real live man; a romantic episode, like a bit out of a story.

At dinner that night I wore my famous diamond necklet. The courtesy lord took me in; he eyed it hungrily. But he wasn't amusing. About eleven o'clock we all went to bed—the women, that is to say, for the men stopped up, the same as usual, saying ugly things about us to one another in

the billiard-room. (Oh, don't talk to *me*, my dear: I know the ways of them.) I went to my own room, and sent away my maid, as soon as she'd taken down my hair. I never was accustomed to maids, of course, before Poppa struck silver, and I've got no use for them. Then I began to undress, and took off my necklet, which I laid on the dressing-table. I meant to put it in the jewel-case; but I was lazy, I presume, for any way I didn't. Then I took off a few things, and looked about for my dressing-gown. It wasn't on the chair, so I went to the wardrobe. I was just going to unhook it, when, to my great surprise, something moved quickly away in the bureau, and hid itself behind one of my best evening dresses. At first I thought it was a rat, and was just going to scream; then I felt conscious it was white and warm, like a human hand; and feeling sure it was only a man after all, I didn't scream, but just pulled back the dress and looked at it.

My dear, it *was* a man; and he was standing there, skulking. I ought to have been frightened, I suppose; but, somehow, I wasn't, not to speak of, that is to say. I



"IT WAS A MAN!"

just stood a second and looked at him. He looked back at me, such a look! Rather curious and inquiring than angry or frightened. Then all at once it came over me that I was half undressed, and the man was staring at me. I blushed till I could feel my face and neck like fire. The man seemed to know what I was thinking—he couldn't well help it, seeing I had turned as red as a turkey-gobbler; and without one word, he unhooked my dressing-gown, and flung it carefully round me. He flung it like a gentleman accustomed to offering ladies their wraps at a dance or theatre. "Thank you," I said, smiling at him, and feeling real grateful, though, of course, very red still, at the thought that a man should have caught me so lightly robed in my own bedroom. "Do please excuse me!"

"Not at all," he answered, stepping out, and facing me. "It's *I* who should apologize for so unwarrantable an intrusion."

He looked like a gentleman. "Well," I said, "what you are here for, any way?"

"Don't be alarmed," he replied, staring hard at me once more as I drew the dressing-gown carefully round me. "I have no right to be here. I'm sorry to have frightened you. I shall withdraw at once, quite quietly, if you'll allow me to do so. I'll leave the house this instant."

He took a step towards the door. I placed myself in front of him. "No, no," I said, "not that way. And not at all till you've explained yourself."

He eyed me most oddly. "You compel me to explain?" he asked.

I nodded my head. "Why, certainly; I compel you."

"I was after your diamonds," he answered, seeming to confront me, half defiantly.

"So is every other man I ever meet in England," I answered, laughing. "I thought, for once, you were something original."

He smiled a curious smile. "You misunderstand me," he put in. "It was the diamonds alone I came for, not *you* with them."

"That's not very polite," I said. "Most people are more courteous. They're ready to take them with all the encumbrances."

"But I hadn't *seen* you then, Miss Flanagan," he replied, looking amused.

"Excuse me," I went on, "but how do you know my name?"

"I heard you were here, and I came to find you."

"Do you mean you are a burglar?"

"Not a professional," he answered; "but an amateur—yes. For this occasion only."

"Well, give *me* England for culture!" said I. "This does beat everything! I never thought I could stand and talk quietly like this with a man who was a housebreaker. You do things in style over here! I took you for a gentleman."

"So I am, I hope," he answered, stammering and growing hot. "At least, I have been hitherto. But to-night I was making a fresh start as a criminal."

I looked him up and down. I'd got over my terror by now, and was really enjoying the humour of the situation. I suppose an English girl would have been frightened—too frightened to speak; but my Irish blood and my Californian training made me see after a minute only the comic side of it. He was evidently a gentleman—most likely an officer. I longed to know what had brought him round to my room that night; but I felt, of course, the situation was too compromising. People might hear us talking and misunderstand the circumstances. "You'd better go now, then," I said, putting back my necklace in its place in the jewel-box. "If people were to hear you——"

He dropped his voice still lower. "Thank you," he answered, with a suppressed tremor; "how very, very good you are. Then you will let me go? You won't rouse the house upon me?"

"Rouse the house!" I cried. "And let everybody know a man's been in the room with me! Why, what do you take me for?"

He looked at me harder still. "Oh, thank you," he said, again. "How can I ever repay you?" And he moved towards the door, with an uneasy movement.

I stopped him instantly. "Not that way," I said. "As you came. Go out by the window."

"How do you know I came by the window?" he said, pausing.

"Because the fastener's twisted," I answered. "I noticed that even before I saw you." I held out my hand. "Good-night," I said, "Mr. Burglar. I'm very much obliged to you; you've behaved like a gentleman."

He took my hand hurriedly. "How strange you are!" he said, "and how brave! Not in the least like an Englishwoman."

He pressed it slightly for a second. Then he turned to the window. "I must go, then," he went on. "It was wrong of me to stay, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to reassure you."

He threw up the sash, and was just going to jump out on to the flat roof outside.

"Stop, stop!" I cried, holding out my jewel-box, "you've forgotten the diamonds!"

My dear, you never saw a man so astonished in your life. He came back like a lamb. "Miss Flanagan," he cried, blushing just as red as I'd blushed myself, "what do you mean by this generosity? Or is it that you want to rouse the house, and let them catch me with the jewels?"

It was my turn to blush. "Well, if you

"Wanted them? Oh, yes; I wanted them, desperately," he cried. "But, take them—how could I? And you've behaved so wonderfully, so bravely, so generously."

"I guess you'll have to tell me now why you wanted them so badly, then," I said. "Men don't generally require diamond necklets for themselves. And as the night's rather cold, I think I'll just trouble you to shut down that window."



"YOU'VE FORGOTTEN THE DIAMONDS!"

think I could behave as mean as that——" I said, quite hurt.

He seized my hand, took the jewel-box out of it, and—laid it back on the dressing-table.

"Forgive me," he said, very low, but earnestly. "You didn't deserve it. I admit you didn't. But do you really mean to say you thought I was to take them?"

"You came after them, you say?" I answered.

"Oh, yes; I came after them."

"Well, naturally, then, I thought you wanted them. A gentleman doesn't try to rob a woman's jewel-box unless he's in straits—and I see you're a gentleman."

He shut it like a lamb. I dropped in an easy chair, and motioned him to another one.

"Well, this *is* the oddest position," he said.

I nodded and smiled. "That's just what I like about it," I answered. "That gives it its beauty. In a world where it's so hard to raise a sensation, there's something quite original and novel, don't you think, in entertaining the man who's come to your rooms to steal your jewels."

He paused a moment and reflected. I fancy I seemed to surprise him. "Well, this is an adventure for me too," he went on, at last; "the queerest I've ever had. But it

has turned out quite differently from anything I expected."

"What did you expect, then?"

"Why, I hoped to get your jewels and make off with them undisturbed. But your maid most fortunately came in and prevented me. So I had only just time to hide in the wardrobe. There I stopped till you came. And you know the rest of it. What a lucky escape! And I might have taken them!"

"Excuse me," I put in. "I don't want to pry into anybody else's business; but might I ask the reason that made you take this rather unusual step? You'll admit it isn't quite in the ordinary course to enter a lady's room to abstract her diamonds?"

"Miss Flanagan," he cried, "you're the most extraordinary woman I ever met. I do admire you!"

"Oh, that's nothing," I answered. "I'm accustomed to being thought extraordinary in England. It's my *rôle*, don't you know, and I'm used to playing it."

"So it seems," he replied, looking at me quite curiously.

"But why did you want to take my diamonds?" I asked, again. "You'll pardon me for my national habit of sticking close to my question."

"Why did I want them?" he repeated, drawing his hand across his forehead. "Oh, Miss Flanagan, why did I want them? Can't you guess? Can't you think? Are you so rich yourself that it never even occurs to you that others may be poor—in difficulties, desperate?"

"Oh, my," I said, staring at him; "*you* don't look as if you were poor. You've the dress and manners and voice of a gentleman."

"I was one, I hope—till to-night," he replied, with that repressed little tremor again. "But doesn't it ever occur to you that even a gentleman may be in difficulties—in terrible straits, where he's ready to do anything, almost anything, for money?"

I rose from my seat and moved over again to the dressing-table. "Take them," I said. "Take them." And I handed him the necklet. "You've struck it rich this time. They're real fine, those diamonds. But they'll be more use to you, I reckon, than ever they've been to me. I tell you, my Poppa can buy me some better ones."

My dear, you won't believe it, but the tears fairly started into that burglar's eyes. He waved my hand away and stood there like a schoolboy. For a minute, I thought he was going to come forward and kiss me. But he

didn't; he only wrung my hand very hard. "Miss Flanagan," he said, "I didn't know there was such kindness and generosity on earth before. You—you've unmanned me—unnerved me. Or, rather, you've made a new man of me."

"How so?" I asked, trying to look as modest and retiring as I could, since the circumstances demanded it.

"I'll never touch those confounded cards again," he cried, suddenly, clasping his hands. "As long as I live, I'll never again touch them!"

"Oh, it was gambling," I said, "was it?"—beginning to understand, and to grow quite sympathetic. For in California, you know, dear, all our men are born gamblers; they go it on anything, from poker to a bonanza; and I suppose my Poppa made his pile in his day pretty much like the rest of them.

He looked at me, red in the face. I could see he was much moved. "Yes, it was gambling," he said, slowly, "but for the very last time. I see now where it leads one. I was desperate—desperate; my last hope gone. I was ready for anything. I didn't know where to turn for hope or comfort. Oh, I can't bear to think to what wild crimes I was being driven! I had almost lost all self-respect. *You* have brought me back to it."

My fingers twitched. I couldn't bear to see him grieved so. "Look here," I said; "you'd *better* take them, they'd set things all straight. I guess you've as good a right to them as I have, any way. My Poppa made his pile out of gambling in silver mines. And they tell me there are folks in California to-day who are beggars just because my Poppa's rich; one man can't make a dollar, my Poppa always says, without another man's losing it. He bought me these diamonds out of money he'd taken indirectly from others; you were going to take them directly again from me. Tweedledum and tweedle-dee! Come to think of it, after all, there ain't so much difference."

He shook his head firmly. My dear, he *was* handsome!

"No, no," he answered, "I won't allow you to take me in with your generous sophisms. An hour ago I'd have stolen those diamonds, I confess, and got clean off with them if I could; now, you make me wonder how I could ever have been such a vile, wicked blackguard."

"Most likely," I answered, "when it came to the pinch, you wouldn't have taken them at all. You're not that sort. You'd have

been struck with remorse, and crept out again quietly."

"How good you are!" he cried, tears in his eyes once more. "Charity thinketh no evil. Well, you've taught me a lesson, and I mean to remember it. Henceforth—" and he rose as if he meant to leave me.

"You're not going?" I said, quite anxiously, forgetting my costume; for he *was* so nice—the nicest man, my dear, I'd met, since I came across to England.

"Yes, I'm going," he answered, in a fixed sort of way. "I ought to have gone half an hour ago. For your sake, it would be wicked of me to remain any longer. Just consider how compromising if anyone were to find me here!"

"That's true," I answered, holding out my hand; "though I've enjoyed my talk with you. But we may meet again. We must arrange this matter. You'll give me your card and let me see you, won't you?"

He drew back quite ashamed. Then he hid his face in his hands and broke down utterly.

"What! after this?" he exclaimed. "Oh, no; never, never!"

"I have deserved it," I said, half reproachfully.

"Yes, yes," he replied; "you have indeed deserved it. But myself—oh, how could I hold my head up again, I ask you, if I knew anyone could say I had done such a thing as this?"

I grasped his hand for a moment. "Well, let us leave it then," I answered. "Don't fancy I want to pry into the question of your name, if you don't wish to give it. Though I had hoped——" and then I broke off, for I really didn't know what I might be tempted to say to him.

He walked towards the window again. I held my hand up. "No, not that way, this time!" I cried. "Suppose anyone were to see you trying to get out there? They'd think you were a burglar."

"So I am," he said, bitterly.

"No, no," I answered. "You're here as my visitor. You must let me let you out by the front door quite properly."

"I can't," he cried, trembling. "That would be wrong, very wrong. If anybody met us, it would give rise to most unjust, most cruel suspicions about your conduct, which you don't deserve. I'd ten thousand times rather be taken and punished as a burglar to-night, than expose any woman as good as you to such wicked and unworthy imputations."

And he raised up the window-sash.

"Well, you *are* good," I said. "I suppose you must do it so. But remember, if ever you change your mind, and are willing to let me know your name and address, I shall be so glad to see you."

"Thank you," he answered; and then he stooped down and kissed my hand. My dear, I suppose I oughtn't to say so; but I was quite

in love with him by that time. He behaved so nicely.

Well, he put his foot on the window-sill. "Good-bye," he said, once more, with a strange sort of choke deep down in his voice. "I thank you from my heart. You have behaved most nobly to me."

I took up the diamonds one last time. "Oh, do take them!" I said, imploring him. "Remember, you'll be just as desperate as ever by - and - by."



"HE BROKE DOWN UTTERLY."

You have still your debts to pay. Why shouldn't you take them? You need them ten thousand times more than I do."

He looked back at me, all remorse. I assure you, May, the tears were just rolling down his cheeks. "Never, my dear brave young lady," he answered, solemnly. "But you have saved a man's soul. Let that be something to you."

Then he jumped and disappeared. I leaned out and looked after him. I won't deny, I felt real bad that minute. To think the poor fellow should be in such dreadful trouble!

Well, weeks and weeks passed. And the longer time went on, the more and more I thought of my burglar. He was the only person who seemed to interest me. I liked that man; I did want to see him. I thought he'd behaved so nicely and manfully. As to his trying to be a burglar, well, that, you know, doesn't count for much on the Pacific slope, where there's been a lot of rough-and-tumble sort of work in the Pikes: most of our millionaires have a sin or two to answer for. My Poppa didn't build a Franciscan church at Sant' Antonio for nothing, I reckon. So I went on and on, going out in London, and hoping some day I'd meet my burglar. They brought up young men to me, on the diamond hunt, don't you know—courtesy lords and such folks, who had heard I was an heiress, and wanted to try their luck in the game. But I didn't care to look at them. They were nothing compared to *him*. He was a man! My dear, as time went on, I just knew I was in love with him.

I idealized him, I suppose—what's a woman for, if not to idealize whatever she loves?—but I *did* want to see him.

At last, one evening, a year or two later, I was out at Lady Arcady's. A lady sat near me, rather young and pretty, a typical Englishwoman—the sort that's born to be a good wife and mother. I didn't notice her much; I only observed she was good and comely. Presently Lady Arcady came up to me where I sat, and began to talk to me.

"So glad you could come, dear Miss Flanagan," she said, "for I want to introduce you to my friend, Lord Alfred Macdougall." ("Another of them," thought I; "bring him on and get it over!") "He knew your father, he says, when he was out in California."

Before I could take good stock of the watery-looking young man in the background, however, the wife and mother turned round and stared hard at me.

"Is that Miss Flanagan, of California?" she asked, half-aside, of Lady Arcady. "Oh, then, I *must* be introduced to her."

Lady Arcady waved aside Lord Alfred for a minute. "Mrs. Mainwaring," she said, introducing her (that wasn't the name, but it'll do just as well as any other)—"Miss Flanagan, of Sacramento."

Mrs. Mainwaring drew me aside. "I felt I *must* know you," she said. "I owe you so many thanks. You've done me such a service. You mayn't know it yourself, but you've saved my husband's soul for him, as he often tells me. I don't quite understand how, but he's been a different man ever since he met you."

For a minute I couldn't think what the good lady was driving at. "Saved his soul?" I repeated. "Oh, my, that's not much in my line, I'm afraid. Though, of course, there are ways of saving and saving!"

"That's just what my husband says," the lady answered. "You *must* recollect him. He met you two years ago, when you were down in Hampshire; and ever since he's been another man. Not that he wasn't always the dearest and best fellow on earth, except for one bad habit; but from that day forth, he has never touched a card; and whenever I speak of it, he always says, 'If I'm a better man now, you and the boys have only that American angel to thank for it.'"

My dear, I almost broke down. It had never even occurred to me for one moment as possible. A married man! A husband and father! In my horror and disappoiment, I could hardly restrain myself from exclaiming, "What, not my burglar!"

She followed my eyes with hers, as I glanced round the room. Yes, there he stood by the piano, as handsome as ever. My heart went out to him.

His wife brought him over. "See, Harry," she said, "who I've found."

He gave a sudden start. Then he gazed at me steadily. My eyes met his. I felt faint with my misery.

"Miss Flanagan," he murmured, very low, "thank you."

He said nothing else, but just stood looking at me.

"I've told her what you say, Harry," the little wife went on, never noticing our embarrassment, thank goodness. "And though I can't imagine what it was you said to him, I shall be grateful to you, Miss Flanagan, as long as I live, for what you've done for us."

She stopped by my side a little while

talking; then she moved away. I had one minute alone with him.

"You were kind to me once," he began; "how kind I don't believe you realize yourself. Will you be kind once more, and forget my name—or else that episode?"

precious hard work; but, thank Heaven, I'm doing it. And once they're paid, I shall never have another one."

"If only you would allow me to lend you a few thousands——" I began.

He waved his hand and checked me,



"I HAD ONE MINUTE ALONE WITH HIM."

I raised my eyes. "It is forgotten," I said, slowly. Oh, dear, he didn't know how hard a thing it was for me to say it.

"Thank you," he answered, again. "From that day forth, I have never touched a card. I had come from a brother officer's rooms, a ruined man. If *you* hadn't saved me, I don't know what might have become of me."

"And your debts?" I asked, trembling.

"I'm paying them off piecemeal. It's

hurriedly. "Not for worlds," he answered. "You taught me a better way. I have begun life afresh. The discipline of saving and paying is good for me."

I never saw him again. My dear, I couldn't bear it. But they may bring up their courtesy lords by the gross now, if they like. I have made up my mind I shall die Norah Flanagan.

So that's why I turned red at your Poppa's question.