

The Unspeakable Perk

By

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Mr. Beetle Man

The man sat in a niche of the mountain, busily hating the Caribbean Sea. It was quite a contract that he had undertaken, for there was a large expanse of Caribbean Sea in sight to hate; very blue, and still, and indifferent to human emotions. However, the young man was a good steadfast hater, and he came there every day to sit in the shade of the overhanging boulder, where there was a little trickle of cool air down the slope and a little trickle of cool water from a crevice beneath the rock, to despise that placid, unimpressionable ocean and all its works and to wish that it would dry up forthwith, so that he might walk back to the blessed United States of America. In good plain American, the young man was pretty homesick.

Two-man's-lengths up the mountain, on the crest of the sturdy hater's rock, the girl sat, loving the Caribbean Sea. Hers, also, was a large contract, and she was much newer to it than was the man to his, for she had only just discovered this vantage-ground by turning accidentally into a side trail--quite a private little side trail made by her unsuspected neighbor below--whence one emerges from a sea of verdure into full view of the sea of azure. For the time, she was content to rest there in the flow of the breeze and feast her eyes on that broad, unending blue which blessedly separated her from the United States of America and certain perplexities and complications comprised therein. Presently she would resume the trail and return to the city of Caracuna, somewhere behind her. That is, she would if she could find it, which was by no means certain. Not that she greatly cared. If she were really lost, they'd come out and get her. Meantime, all she wished was to rest mind and body in the contemplation of that restful plain of cool sapphire, four thousand feet below.

But there was a spirit of mischief abroad upon that mountain slope. It embodied itself in a puff of wind that stirred gratefully the curls above the girl's brow. Also, it fanned the neck of the watcher below and cunningly moved his hat from his side; not more than a few feet, indeed, but still far enough to transfer it from the shade into the glaring sun and into the view of the girl above. The owner made no move. If the wind wanted to blow his new panama into some lower treetop, compelling him to throw stones, perhaps to its permanent damage, in order to dislodge it, why, that was just one more cause of offense to pin to his indictment of irritation against the great island republic of Caracuna. Such is the temper one gets into after a year in the tropics.

Like as peas are panama hats to the eyes of the inexpert; far more like than men who live under them. For the girl, it was a direct inference that this was a hat which she knew intimately; which, indeed, she had rather maliciously eluded, riot half an hour before. Therefore, she addressed it familiarly: "Boo!"

The result of this simple monosyllable exceeded her fondest expectations. There was a sharp exclamation of surprise, followed by a cry that might have meant dismay or wrath or both, as something metallic tinkled and slid, presently coming to a stop beside the hat, where it revealed itself as a pair of enormous, aluminum-mounted brown-green spectacles. After it, on all fours, scrambled the owner.

Shock number one: It wasn't the man at all! Instead of the black-haired, flanneled, slender Adonis whom the trouble-maker confidently assumed to have been under that hat, she beheld a brownish-clad, stocky figure with a very blond head.

Shock number two: The figure was groping lamentably and blindly in the undergrowth, and when, for an instant, the face was turned half toward her, she saw that the eyes were squinted tight-closed, with a painful extreme of muscular tension about them.

Presently one of the ranging hands encountered the spectacles, and settled upon them. With careful touches, it felt them all over. A mild grunt, presumably of satisfaction, made itself heard, and the figure got to its feet. But before the face turned again, the girl had stepped back, out of range.

Silence, above and below; a silence the long persistence of which came near to constituting shock number three. What sort of hermit had she intruded upon? Into what manner of remote Brahministic contemplation had she injected that impertinent "Boo!?" Who, what, how, why--

"Say it again." The request came from under the rock. Evidently the spectacled owner had resumed his original situation.

"Say WHAT again?" she inquired.

"Anything," returned the voice, with child-like content.

"Oh, I--I hope you didn't break your glasses."

"No; you didn't."

On consideration, she decided to ignore this prompt countering of the pronoun.

"I thought you were some one else," she observed.

"Well, so I am, am I not?"

"So you are what?"

"Some one else than you thought."

"Why, yes, I suppose--But I meant some one else besides yourself."

"I only wish I were."

"Why?" she asked, intrigued by the fervid inflection of the wish.

"Because then I'd be somewhere else than in this infernal hell-hole of a black-and-tan nursery of revolution, fever, and trouble!"

"I think it one of the loveliest spots I've ever seen," said she loftily.

"How long have you been here?"

"On this rock? Perhaps five minutes."

"Not on the rock. In Caracuna?"

"Quite a long time. Nearly a fortnight."

The commentary on this was so indefinite that she was moved to inquire:--

"Is that a local dialect you're speaking?"

"No; that was a grunt."

"I don't think it was a very polite grunt, even as grunts go."

"Perhaps not. I'm afraid I'm out of the habit."

"Of grunting? You seem expert enough to satisfy--"

"No; of being polite. I'll apologize if--if you'll only go on talking."

She laughed aloud.

"Or laughing," he amended promptly. "Do it again."

"One can't laugh to order!" she protested; "or even talk to order. But why do you stay 'way out here in the mountains if you're so eager to hear the human voice?"

"The human voice be--choked! It's YOUR human voice I want to hear --your kind of human voice, I mean." "I don't know that my kind of human voice is particularly different from plenty of other human voices," she observed, with an effect of fine impartial judgment.

"It's widely different from the kind that afflicts the suffering ear in this part of the world. Fourteen months ago I heard the last American girl speak the last American-girl language that's come within reach of me. Oh, no,--there WAS one, since, but she rasped like a rheumatic phonograph and had brick-colored freckles. Have you got brick-colored freckles?"

"Stand up and see."

"No, SIR!--that is, ma'am. Too much risk."

"Risk! Of what?"

"Freckles. I don't like freckles. Not on YOUR voice, anyway."

"On my VOICE? Are you--"

"Of course I am--a little. Any one is who stays down here more than a year. But that about the voice and the freckles was sane enough. What I'm trying to say--and you might know it without a diagram--is that, from your voice, you ought to be all that a man dreams of when--well, when he hasn't seen a real American girl for an eternity. Now I can sit here and dream of you as the loveliest princess that ever came and went and left a memory of gold and blue in the heart of--"

"I'm not gold and blue!"

"Of course you're not. But your speech is. I'll be wise, and content myself with that. One look might pull down, in irrevocable ruin, all the lovely fabric of my dream. By the way, are you a Cookie?"

"A WHAT?"

"Cookie. Tourist. No, of course you're not. No tour would be imbecile enough to touch here. The question is: How did you get here?"

"Ah, that's my secret."

"Or, rather, are you here at all? Perhaps you're just a figment of the overstrained ear. And if I undertook to look, there wouldn't be anything there at all."

"Of course, if you don't believe in me, I'll fly away on a sunbeam."

"Oh, please! Don't say that! I'm doing my best."

So panic-stricken was the appeal that she laughed again, in spite of herself.

"Ah, that's better! Now, come, be honest with me. You're not pretty, are you?"

"Me? I'm as lovely as the dawn."

"So far, so good. And have you got long golden--that is to say, silken hair that floats almost to your knees?"

"Certainly," she replied, with spirit.

"Is it plentiful enough so that you could spare a little?"

"Are you asking me for a lock of my hair?" she queried, on a note of mirth. "For a stranger, you go fast."

"No; oh, no!" he protested. "Nothing so familiar. I'm offering you a bribe for conversation at the price of, say, five hairs, if you can sacrifice so many."

"It sounds delightfully like voodoo," she observed. "What must I do with them?"

"First, catch your hair. Well up toward the head, please. Now pull it out. One, two, three--yank!"

"Ouch!" said the voice above.

"Do it again. Now have you got two?"

"Yes."

"Knot them together."

There was a period of silence.

"It's very difficult," complained the girl.

"Because you're doing it in silence. There must be sprightly conversation or the charm won't work. Talk!"

"What about?"

"Tell me who you thought I was when you said, 'Boo!' at me."

"A goose."

"A--a GOOSE! Why--what--"

"Doesn't one proverbially say 'Boo!' to a goose?" she remarked demurely.

"If one has the courage. Now, I haven't. I'm shy."

"Shy! You?" Again the delicious trill of her mirth rang in his ears. "I should imagine that to be the least of your troubles."

"No! Truly." There was real and anxious earnestness in his assurance. "It's because I don't see you. If I were face to face with you, I'd stammer and get red and make a regular imbecile of myself. Another reason why I stick down here and decline to yield to temptation."

"O wise young man! ARE you young? Ouch!"

"Reasonably. Was that the last hair?"

"Positively! I'm scalped. You're a red Indian."

"Tie it on. Now, fasten a hairpin on the end and let it down. All right. I've got it. Wait!"
The fragile line of communication twitched for a moment. "Haul, now. Gently!"

Up came the thread, and, as its burden rose over the face of the rock, the girl gave a little cry of delight:--

"How exquisite! Orchids, aren't they?"

"Yes, the golden-brown bee orchid. Just your coloring."

"So it is. How do you know?" she asked, startled.

"From the hair. And your eyes have gold flashes in the brown when the sun touches them."

"Your wits are YOUR eyes. But where do you get such orchids?"

"From my little private garden underneath the rock."

"Life will be a dull and dreary round unless I see that garden."

"No! I say! Wait! Really, now, Miss--er--" There was panic in the protest.

"Oh, don't be afraid. I'm only playing with your fears. One look at you as you chased your absurd spectacles was enough to satisfy my curiosity. Go in peace, startled fawn that you are."

"Go nothing! I'm not going. Neither are you, I hope, until you've told me lots more about yourself."

"All that for a spray of orchids?"

"But they are quite rare ones."

"And very lovely."

The girl mused, and a sudden impulse seized her to take the unseen acquaintance at his word and free her mind as she had not been able to do to any living soul for long weeks. She pondered over it.

"You aren't getting ready to go?" he cried, alarmed at her long silence.

"No; I'm thinking."

"Please think aloud."

"I was thinking--suppose I did."

There was so much of weighty consideration in her accents that the other fear again beset him.

"Did what? Not come down from the rock?" "Be calm. I shouldn't want to face you any more than you want to face me, if I decided to do it."

"Go on," he encouraged. "It sounds most promising."

"More than that. It's fairly thrilling. It's the awful secret of my life that I'm considering laying bare to you, just like a dime novel. Are you discreet?"

"As the eternal rocks. Prescribe any form of oath and I'll take it."

"I'm feeling just irresponsible enough to venture. Now, if I knew you, of course I couldn't. But as I shall never set eyes on you again--I never shall, shall I?"

"Not unless you creep up on me unawares."

"Then I'll unburden my overweighted heart, and you can be my augur and advise me with supernatural wisdom. Are you up to that?"

"Try me."

"I will. But, remember: this means truly that we are never to meet. And if you ever do meet me and recognize my voice, you must go away at once."

"Agreed," he said cheerfully, just a bit too cheerfully to be flattering.

"Very well, then. I'm a runaway."

"From where?"

"Home."

"Naturally. Where's home?"

"Utica, New York," she specified.

"U.S.A.," he concluded, with a sigh. "What did you run away from?"

"Trouble."

"Does any one ever run away from anything else?" he inquired philosophically. "What particular brand?"

"Three men," she said dolorously. "All after poor little me. They all thought I ought to marry them, and everybody else seemed to think so, too--"

"Go slow! Did you say Utica or Utah?"

"Everybody thought I ought to marry one or the other of 'em, I mean. If I could have married them all, now, it might have been easier, for I like them ever so much. But how could I make up my mind? So I just seized papa around the neck and ran away with him down here."

"Why here, of all places on earth?"

"Oh, he's interested in some mines and concessions and things. It's very beautiful, but I almost wish I'd stayed at home and married Bobby."

"Which is Bobby?"

"He's one of the home boys. We've grown up together, and I'm so fond of him. Only it's more the brother-and-sister sort of thing, if he'd let it be."

"Check off No. 1. What's No. 2?"

"Lots older. Mr. Thomas Murray Smith is an unspoiled millionaire. If he weren't so serious and quite so dangerously near forty-- well, I don't know."

"Have you kept No. 3 for the last because he's the best?"

"No-o-o-o. Because he's the nearest. He followed me down. You can see his name in all its luster on the Hotel Kast register, when you get back to the city--Preston Fairfax Fitzhugh Carroll, at your service."

"Sounds Southern," commented the man below.

"Southern! He's more Southern than the South Pole. His ancestors fought all the wars and owned all the negroes--he calls them 'niggers'--and married into all the first families of Virginia, and all that sort of thing. He must quite hate himself, poor Fitz, for falling in love with a little Yankee like me. In fact, that's why I made him do it."

"And now you wish he hadn't?"

"Oh--well--I don't know. He's awfully good-looking and gallant and devoted and all that. Only he's such a prickly sort of person. I'd have to spend the rest of my life keeping him and his pride out of trouble. And I've no taste for diplomacy. Why, only last week he declined to dine with the President of the Republic because some one said that his excellency had a touch of the tar brush."

"He'd better get out of this country before that gets back to headquarters."

"If he thought there was danger, he'd stay forever. I don't suppose Fitz is afraid of anything on earth. Except perhaps of me," she added after-thoughtfully.

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