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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BRITISH ISLANDER \*\*\*

# A BRITISH ISLANDER

From "Mackinac And Lake Stories", 1899

By Mary Hartwell Catherwood

*\* This story is set down exactly as it was told by the  
Island Chronicler.*

Well, I wish you could have been here in Mrs. Gunning's day. She was the oddest woman on Mackinac. Not that she exerted herself to attract attention. But she was such a character, and her manners were so astonishing, that she furnished perennial entertainment to the few families of us constituting island society.

She was an English woman, born in South Africa, and married to an American army surgeon, and had lived over a large part of the world before coming to this fort. She had no children. But her sister had married Dr. Gunning's brother. And the good-for-nothing pair set out to follow the English drum-beat around the world, and left a child for the two more responsible ones to rear. Juliana Gunning was so deaf she could not hear thunder. But she was quits with nature, for all that; a wonderfully alluring kind of girl, with big brown eyes that were better than ears, and that could catch the meaning of moving lips. It seemed to strangers that she merely evaded conversation; for she had a sweet voice, a little drawling, and was witty when she wanted to speak. Juliana couldn't step out of the surgeon's quarters to walk across the parade-ground without making every soldier in the fort conscious of her. She was well-shaped and tall, and a slight pitting of the skin only enhanced the charm of her large features. She used to dress unlike anybody else, in foreign things that her aunt gave her, and was always carrying different kinds of thin scarfs to throw over her face and tantalize the men.

Everybody knew that Captain Markley would marry her if he could. But along comes Dr. Mc-Curdy, a wealthy widower from the East, and nothing will do but he must hang about Mackinac week after week, pretending to need the climate—and he weighing nearly two hundred—to court Juliana Gunning. The lieutenant's wife said of Juliana that she would flirt with a half-breed if nothing better offered. But the lieutenant's wife was a homely, jealous little thing, and could never have had all the men hanging after her. And if she had had the chance she might have been as aggravating about making up her mind between two as Juliana was.

We used to think the girl very good-natured. But those three people made a queer family. Dr. Gunning was the remnant of a magnificent man, and he always had a courtly air. He paid little attention to the small affairs of life, and rated money as nothing. Dr. Gunning had his peculiarities; but I am not telling you about him. He was a kind man, and would cross the strait in any weather to attend a sick half-breed or any other ailing creature, who probably never paid him a cent. He was fond of the island, and quite satisfied to spend his life here.

The day I am telling you about, Mrs. Gunning had driven with me into the village to make some calls. She was very punctilious about calling upon strangers. If she intended to recognize a newcomer she called at once. We drove around to the rear of the fort and entered at the back sallyport, where carriages always enter; but instead of letting me put her down at the surgeon's quarters, she ordered the driver to stop in the middle of the parade-ground. Then she got out and, with never a word, marched down the steps to Captain Markley, where he was leaning against the front sally-port, looking below into the town. I didn't know what to do, so I sat and waited. It was the loveliest autumn morning you ever saw. I remember the beeches and oaks and maples were spread out like banners to the very height of the island, all crimson and yellow splashes in the midst of evergreens. There had been an awful storm the night before, and you could see down the sally-port how drenched the fort garden was at the foot of the hill.

Captain Markley had a fearfully depressed look. He was so down in the mouth that the sentinels noticed it. I saw the one in front of the western block-house stick his tongue in his cheek and wink at one pacing below. We heard afterwards that Captain Markley had been out alone to inspect target-ranges in the pine woods, and almost ran against Juliana Gunning and Dr. McCurdy sitting on a log. Before he could get out of the way he overheard the loudest proposal ever made on Mackinac. It used to be told about in mess, though how it got out Captain Markley said he did not know, unless they heard it at the fort.

"I have brought you out here," the doctor shouted to Juliana, as loud as a cow lowing, "to tell you that I love you! I want you to be my wife!"

She behaved as if she didn't hear—I think that minx often had fun with her deafness—and inclined her head to one side.

So he said it all over again.

"I have brought you to this secluded spot to tell you that I love you! I want you to be my wife!"

It was like a steamer bellowing on the strait. Then Juliana threw her scarf over her face, and Captain Markley broke away through the bushes.

Mrs. Gunning never said a word to me about either of the suitors. It wasn't because she didn't talk, for she was a great talker. We had to postpone a card-party one evening, on account of the continuous flow of Mrs. Gunning's conversation, which never ceased until it was time for refreshments, there being not a moment's pause for the tables to be set out.



**I WAS STARTLED TO SEE HER RUSH AT THE CAPTAIN**

I was startled to see her rush down at Captain Markley, brandishing her parasol as if she were going to knock him down. I thought if she had any preference it would be for an army man; for you know an army woman's contempt of civilian money and position. Army women continually want to be moving on; and they hate bothering with household stuff, such as we prize.

Captain Markley did look poor-spirited, drooping against the sally-port, for a man who in his uniform was the most conspicuous figure to Mackinac girls in a ball-room. Maybe if he had been courting anything but a statue he might have made a better figure at it. Juliana was worse than a statue, though; for she could float through a thousand graceful poses, and drive a man crazy with her eyes. He wasn't the lover to go out in the woods and shoot a proposal as loud as a cannon at a girl; and it seems he couldn't get any satisfaction from her by writing notes.

Mrs. Gunning was drawing off her gloves as she marched at him with her parasol, and I remember how her emeralds and diamonds flashed in the sun—old heirlooms. I never saw another woman who had so many precious stones. She was tall, with that robust English quality that sometimes goes with slenderness. She and Juliana were not a bit alike. When she walked, her feet came down pat. I pitied Captain Markley. By leaning over the carriage I could see him give a start as Mrs. Gunning pounced at him.

"It's a fine day after the storm, Captain Markley," says she; and he lifted his cap and said it was.

Then she made a rush that I thought would drive him down the cliff, and whirled her parasol around his

head like sword-play, talking about the havoc of the storm. She rippled him from head to foot and poked at his eyes, and jabbed him, to show how lightning struck the rocks, Captain Markley all the time moving back and dodging; and to save my life I couldn't help laughing, though the sentinels above him saw it. They were pretty well used to her, and rolled their quids in their cheeks, and winked at one another.

When she had all but thrown him down-hill, she stuck the ferrule right under his nose and shook it, and says she: "Yet it is now as fine a day as if no such convulsion had ever threatened the island. It is often so in this world."

He couldn't deny that, miserable as he looked. And I thought she would let him alone and come and say good-day to me. But no, indeed! She took him by the arm. Soldiers off duty were lounging on the benches, and Captain Markley wouldn't let them see him haled like a prisoner. He marched square-shouldered and erect; and Mrs. Gunning says to me as they reached the carriage:

"The captain will help you down if you will come with us. I am going to show him my Shanghai rooster."

I thanked her, and gladly let him help me down. I wasn't going to desert the poor fellow when Mrs.

Gunning was dealing with him; and, besides, I wanted to see that rooster myself. We heard such stories of the way she kept her chickens and labored over all the domestic animals she gathered around herself at the fort.



THE QUARTERS

By ascending a steep bank on which the western block-house stands, you know you can look down into the drill-ground—that wide meadow behind the fort, with quarters at the back. Mrs. Gunning had an enclosure built outside the wall for her chickens; and there they were, walking about, scratching the ground, and diverting themselves as well as they could in their clothes. She had a shed at one end of the enclosure, and all the hens, walking about or sitting on nests, wore hoods! Holes were made for their eyes but none for their beaks, and the eyelets seemed to magnify so that they looked wrathful as they stretched their necks and quavered in those bags. Captain Markley and I both burst out laughing, but Mrs. Gunning explained it all seriously.

"They eat their eggs," says she; "so I tie hoods on them until I have collected the eggs for the day."

I remember some were clawing their head-gear, trying alternate feet, and two determined hens were trying to peck each other free. But they wore generally resigned, and we might have grown so after the first minute, if it hadn't been for the rooster.

Captain Markley roared, and I leaned against the lower part of the block-house and held my sides. That long-legged, awkward, high-stepping Shanghai cock was dressed like a man in a suit of clothes—all but a hat. His coat-sleeves extended over his wings, and when he flapped them to crow, and stuck his claws out of his trousers-legs, I wept tears on my handkerchief. Mrs. Gunning talked straight ahead without paying any attention to our laughter. If it ever had been funny to her it had ceased to be so. She had not brought Captain Markley there to amuse him.

"Look at that Shanghai rooster now," says she. "I brought him up from the South. I put him among the hens and they picked all his feathers off. He was as bare, captain, as your hand. He was literally hen-pecked. First one would step up to him and pull out a feather; then another; and he, poor fool, did nothing but cower against the fence. It never seemed to enter his brain-pan he could put a stop to the torture. There he was, without a feather to cover himself with, and the cool autumn nights coming on. So I took some gray cloth and made him these clothes. He would have been picked to the bone if I hadn't. But they put spunk into him. That Shanghai rooster has found out he has to assert himself, captain, and he does assert himself."

I saw Captain Markley turn red, and I knew he wished the sentinel wasn't standing guard a few feet away in front of that block-house.

She might have let him alone after she had given him that thrust, and gone on to her house, and said good-bye in the usual way. But just as he was helping me down it happened that Juliana and Dr. Mc-Curdy appeared through the rear sally-port, which they must have reached by skirting the wall instead of crossing the drill-field. As soon as Mrs. Gunning saw them she stiffened, and clubbed her umbrella at Captain Markley again. He couldn't get away, so he stood his ground.

"See that creature begin to curvet and roll her eyes!" says Mrs. Gunning. "If the parade-ground were full of

men I think she would prance over the parapet. At my age she may have some sense and feeling. But I would be glad to see her in the hands of a man who knew how to assert himself."

"May I ask," says Captain Markley, "what you mean by a man's asserting himself, Mrs. Gunning?"

She made such a pounce at him with the parasol that her waist began to rip in the back.

"My dear boy, I am a full-blooded Briton, and Juliana is what you may call an English half-breed. In the bottom of our hearts we have a hankering for monarchy. The lion, who permits nobody else to poach on his preserves, is our symbol. While the vexatious child and I are not at all alike in other things, I know she admires as much as I do a man who asserts himself."

Though it was said Juliana Gunning could not hear thunder, she generally understood her aunt's voice, and could tell when she was being talked about. She came straight to her own rescue, as you might say, and Dr. McCurdy, poor man, was very polite, but not cheerful. If we had known then what he had been yelling in the woods, we should have understood better why Captain Markley seemed to pluck up and strut at the sight of him.

I think Mrs. Gunning determined to finish the business that very hour. She met Dr. McCurdy with all the sweetness she could put into her manner just before she intended to pounce the hardest.

"I have been showing the captain my chickens," she says, "and now I want to show you my cows."

Dr. McCurdy thanked her, and said he would be delighted to see the cows, but he stuck to Juliana like a shadow. Maybe he expected the cows would give him a further excuse for being with her. But Mrs. Gunning cut him off there. She gave her keys to her niece, and says she:

"Go in the house, my dear, and set out the decanter and glasses, and give Captain Markley a glass of wine to keep him until we come back. I want to tell him something more about that Shanghai rooster."

Juliana understood, and took the keys, and rolled her eyes tantalizingly at Dr. McCurdy. The poor fellow made a stand, and said the cows would do some other time, and mightn't he beg for a glass of wine too, after his walk?

"Certainly, doctor, certainly," says Mrs. Gunning, leading the way to the front sally-port. "We expect you to take a glass with us. But while Juliana sets out the decanter, let us look at the cows."

She hadn't mentioned me, but I didn't care for that, knowing Mrs. Gunning as I did. I should have followed if she hadn't beckoned to me, for I was as determined to see the affair through as she was to finish it.

We had to go down that long path from the front sally-port to the street, and then turn into the field at the foot of the hill, where the fort stables are. Mrs. Gunning talked all the time about cattle, flourishing her parasol and flashing her diamonds and emeralds in the sun, and telling Dr. McCurdy she had intended to ask his opinion about them ever since his arrival on the island. He answered yes, and no, and seemed to be thinking of anything but cattle.

Mackinac cows tinkled their bells in every thicket. But Mrs. Gunning's pets were brought in morning and afternoon to clean, well-lighted stalls. There they stood in a row, sleek as if they had been curried—and I have heard that she did curry them herself—all switching natural tails except one. And, as sure as you live, that cow had a false tail that Mrs. Gunning had made for her!

She took hold of it and showed it to us. It did not seem very funny to Dr. McCurdy, but he had to listen to what she said.

"Spotty was a fine cow, but by some accident she had lost her tail, and I got her cheaper on that account," says Mrs. Gunning. "You don't know how distressing it was to see her switching a stump. So I made her a tail of whalebone and India-rubber and yarn. I knit it myself."

The poor fellow looked up at the fort and said: "Yes. It is very interesting/ Mrs. Gunning."

"I am aware," says she, "that the expedient was never hit upon before. But Spotty's brush is a great success. It used to make me unhappy to think of leaving this post. All the other cows might find good homes with new owners; but who would care for Spotty? Since I have supplied her deficiency, however, and know that the supply can constantly be renewed, my mind is easy about her. If you ever have to knit a cow's tail, doctor, remember the foundations are whalebone and India-rubber; and I would advise you to use the coarsest yarn you can find for the brush."

"I will, Mrs. Gunning," he says, like a man who wanted to lie down in the straw and die. And I couldn't laugh and relieve myself, because it was like laughing at him.

"Now that shows," says Mrs. Gunning, and she pounced at him and shook her parasol in his face so vigorously that she ripped in the back the same as a chrysalis, "how easy it is to remedy a seemingly incurable injury."

If he didn't understand her then, he did afterwards. But he looked as if he couldn't endure it any longer, and made for the door.

"Stop, Dr. McCurdy," says she. "You haven't heard these cows' pedigrees."

He stopped, and said: "How long are the pedigrees?"

"Here are four generations," says Mrs. Gunning—"grandmother, mother, daughter, and grandchild." And on she went, tracing their lineage through blooded stock for more than half an hour. She was enthusiastic, too, and got between the doctor and the door, and emphasized all her points with the parasol. Her back kept ripping until I ought to have told her, but I knew the man was too mad to look at her, and she was so happy herself, I said, "I will let her alone."

I had forgotten all about my half-breed driver, sitting on the parade-ground in the waiting carriage. But he was enjoying himself too, when we climbed to the fort again, with a soldier lounging on the front wheel.

Well, as soon as I entered the little parlor that Mrs. Gunning called her drawing-room—ornamented with the movable knickknacks that an army woman carries around with her, you know—I saw that Captain Markley had asserted himself. If he hadn't asserted himself on that occasion, I do believe Mrs. Gunning would have been done with him forever. I never saw a man so anxious to show that he was accepted. Of course he

couldn't announce the engagement until it had been sanctioned by the girl's foster-parents. But he put Juliana through the engaged drill like a veteran, and she was wonderfully meek.

I suppose one British woman knows another better than an American can. But I felt sorry for Dr. McCurdy when he saw the state of things and took his leave, and Mrs. Gunning rubbed his defeat on the raw.

"Ah, my dear friend," says she, shaking his hand, "we see that buds will match with buds. I could never find it in my heart to wed a bud to a full-blown rose."

I don't doubt that the full-blown rose, as he went down the fort hill, cursed Mrs. Gunning's cow's tail and all her cows' pedigrees. But she looked as serene as if he had pledged the young couple's health (instead of going off and leaving his wine half tasted), and took me to see her chickens' cupboard.

There were shelves with rows of cans and bottles, each can or bottle labelled "Molly," or "Lucy," or "Speckie," and so on.

"I have discovered," Mrs. Gunning says to me, "that one hen's food may be another hen's poison, so I mix and prepare for each fowl what that fowl seems to need. For instance, Lucy can bear more meal than Speckie, and the Shanghai cock had to be strongly encouraged. Though it sometimes happens," says she, casting her eye back towards the drawing-room, "that such a fellow gets pampered, and has to have his diet reduced and his spirit cooled down again."

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