

"MY LADY CAPRICE"

By JEFFERY FARNOL

Illustrated by T. V. McCARTHY

(Copyright, Paget Newspaper Service, New York)

New Readers Begin Here

SIX months' respite is demanded by Aunt Agatha before Dick Brent shall declare his love for Lisbeth. Aunt Agatha, meanwhile, exiles the girl to Fane Court in the hope of wedding her to Horace Selwyn, a richer man. Dick follows, meets Lisbeth and wins the goodwill of her small nephew, the Imp. Through the machinations of the Imp he becomes entangled in an altercation with Mr. Selwyn, coming off with flying colors. Later, Mr. Selwyn fails to keep his engagement to take Lisbeth upon the water and is supplanted by Dick. Lisbeth attends a ball, and the Imp, incarcerated for his misdeeds, sends to Dick a plea for rescue. This is effected, and Dick and the Imp enter by stealth the grounds where the ball is taking place, where they meet Lisbeth.

"DICK," she said, "I must go back at once—before they miss me."
"Go back!" I repeated, "never—that is, not yet."
"But suppose any one saw us!" she said, with a hairpin in her mouth.

"They shan't," I answered; "you will see to that, won't you, Imp?"
"Course I will, Uncle Dick!"

"Then go you, Sir Knight, and keep faithful ward behind yon apple tree, and let no base varlet hither come; that is, if you see any one, be sure to tell me." The Imp saluted and promptly disappeared behind the apple tree in question, while I stood watching Lisbeth's dexterous fingers and striving to remember a line from Keats descriptive of a beautiful woman in the moonlight. Before I could call it to mind, Lisbeth interrupted me.

"Don't you think you might pick up my shawl instead of staring at me as if I was—"

"The most beautiful woman in the world!" I put in.

"Who is catching her death of cold?" she laughed, yet for all her light tone her eyes drooped before mine as I obediently wrapped the shawl about her, in the doing of which, my arm being round her, very naturally stayed there, and—wonder of wonders, was not repulsed. And at this very moment, from the shadowy trees behind us, came the rich, clear song of a nightingale.

"Oh! most certainly the air was full of magic to-night!"
"Dick," said Lisbeth very softly, as the trilling notes died away, "I thought one could only dream such a night as this is."

"And yet life might hold many such for you and me, if you would only let it, Lisbeth," I reminded her. She did not answer.

"Not far from the village of Down, in Kent," I began.
"There stands a house," she put in, staring up at the moon with dreamy eyes.

"Yes."
"A very old house, with twisted Tudor chimneys and pointed gables—you see I have it all by heart, Dick—a house with wide stairways and long panelled chambers—"

"Very empty and desolate at present," I added.
"And amongst other things, there is a rose-garden—they call it My Lady's Garden, Lisbeth, though no lady has trod its winding paths for years and years. But I have dreamed, many and many a time, that we stood among the roses, she and I, upon just such another night as this is. So I keep the old house ready and the gardens freshly trimmed, ready for my lady's coming; must I wait much longer, Lisbeth?" As I ended the nightingale took up the story, pleading my cause for me, filling the air with a melody now appealing, now commanding, until it gradually died away in one long note of passionate entreaty.

Lisbeth sighed and turned towards me, but as she did so I felt a tug at my coat, and, looking round, beheld the Imp.

"Uncle Dick," he said, his eyes studiously averted, doubtless on account of the position of my arm, "here's Mr. Selwyn!"

With a sudden exclamation Lisbeth started from me and gathered up her skirts to run.

"Whereaway, my Imp?"
"Coming across the lawn."

"Reginald," I said solemnly, "listen to me; you must sally out upon him with lance in rest, tell him you are a Knight-errant, wishful to uphold the glory of that faire ladye, your Auntie Lisbeth, and whatever happens you must manage to keep him away from here, do you understand?"

"Yes, only I do wish I'd brought my trusty sword, you know," he sighed.

"Never mind that now, Imp."

"Will Auntie Lisbeth be quite—"

"She will be all right."

"I suppose if you put your arm—"

"Never mind my arm, Imp, go!"

"Then fare thee well!" said he, and with a melodramatic flourish of his lance, trotted off.

"What did he mean about your arm, Dick?"
"Probably this!" I answered, slipping it around her again.

"But you must get away at once," whispered Lisbeth; "if Mr. Selwyn should see you—"

"I intend that he shall. Oh, it will be quite simple; while he is talking to me you can get back to the—"

"Hush!" she whispered, laying her fingers on my lips; listen!

"Hullo, Mr. Selwyn!" came in the Imp's familiar tones.
"Why, good Heavens!" exclaimed another voice, much too near to be pleasant, "what on earth are you doing here—and at this time of night?"

"Looking for base varlets!"
"Don't you know that all little boys—all nice little boys—should have been in bed hours ago?"

"But I'm not a nice little boy; I'm a Knight-errant; would you like to get a lance, Mr. Selwyn, an' break it with me to the glory of my Auntie Lisbeth?"

"The question is, what has become of her?" said Mr. Selwyn. We waited almost breathlessly for the answer.

"Oh! I specks she's somewhere looking at the moon; everybody looks at the moon, you know; Betty does, an' the lady with the man with a funny name, 'bout being bald, an'—"

"I think you had better come up to the house," said Mr. Selwyn.

"Do you think you could get me an ice cream if I did?" asked the Imp, persuasively; "nice an' pink, you know, with—"

"An ice!" repeated Mr. Selwyn; "I wonder how many you have had already to-night?"
The time for action was come.

"LISBETH," I said, "we must go; such happiness as this could not last; how should it? I think it is given us to dream over in less happy days. For me it will be memory to treasure always, and yet there might be one thing more—a little thing, Lisbeth—can you guess?" She did not speak, but I saw the dimple come and go at the corner of her mouth, so I stooped and kissed her. For a moment, all too brief, we stood thus, with the glory of the moonlight about us; then I was hurrying across the lawn after Selwyn and the Imp.

"Ah, Mr. Selwyn!" I said as I overtook them, "so you have found him, have you?" Mr. Selwyn turned to regard me, surprise writ large upon him, from the points of his immaculate, patent-leather shoes, to the parting of his no less immaculate hair.

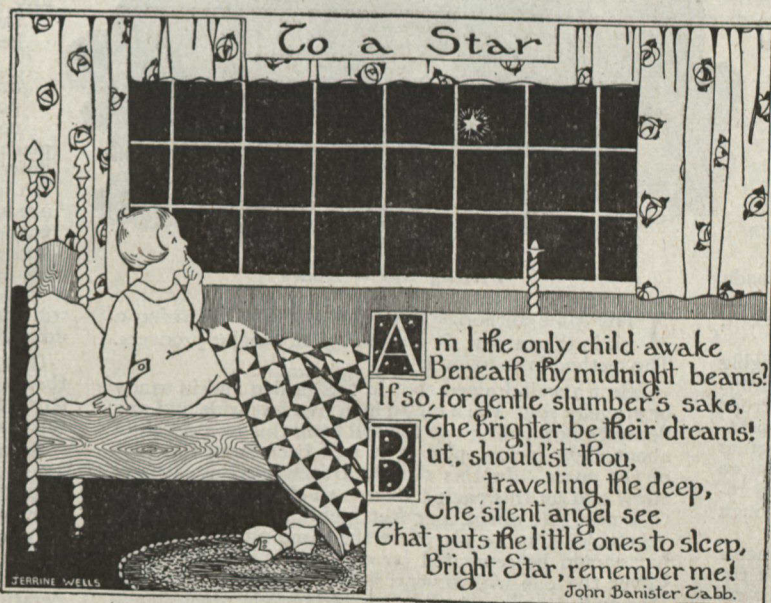
"So very good of you," I continued; "you see he is such a difficult object to recover when once he gets mislaid; really, I'm awfully obliged." Mr. Selwyn's attitude was politely formal. He bowed.

"What is it to-night," he inquired, "pirates?"
"Hardly as bad as that," I returned; "to-night the air is full of the clash of armor and the ring of steel; if you do not hear it that is not our fault."

"An' the woods are full of caddish barons and caitiff knaves, you know, aren't they, Uncle Dick?"

"Certainly," I nodded, "with lance and spear-point twinkling through the gloom; but in the silver glory of the moon, Mr. Selwyn, walk errant damozels and ladyes faire, and again, if you don't see them, the loss is yours." As I spoke, away upon the terrace a grey shadow paused a moment ere it was swallowed in the brilliance of the ballroom; seeing which I did not mind the slightly superior smile that curved Mr. Selwyn's very precise moustache; after all, my rhapsody had not been altogether thrown away.

As I ended, the opening bars of a waltz floated out to us. Mr. Selwyn glanced back over his shoulder.
"Ah! I suppose you can find your way out?" he inquired.
"Oh, yes, thanks."



"Then if you will excuse me, I think I'll leave you to—ah—to do it; the next dance is beginning, and—ah—"

"Certainly," I said, "of course—good-night, and much obliged, really!" Mr. Selwyn bowed, and, turning away, left us to our own resources.

"I should have liked another ice, Uncle Dick," sighed the Imp, regretfully.

"Knights never ate ice cream!" I said, as we set off along the nearest path.

"Uncle Dick," said the Imp suddenly, "do you s'pose Mr. Selwyn wants to put his arm round Auntie Lis—"

"Possibly!"

"An' do you s'pose that Auntie Lisbeth wants Mr. Selwyn to—"

"I don't know—of course not—er—kindly shut up, will you, Imp?"

"I only wanted to know, you know," he murmured.

Therewith we walked on in silence and I fell to dreaming of Lisbeth again, of how she had sighed, of the look in her eyes as she turned to me with her answer trembling on her lips—the answer which the Imp had inadvertently cut short.

In this frame of mind I drew near to that corner of the garden where she had stood with me, that quiet shady corner, which henceforth would remain enshrined within my memory for her sake, which—

I stopped suddenly short at the sight of two figures—one in the cap and apron of a waiting maid and the other in the gorgeous plush and gold braid of a footman; and they were standing upon the very spot where Lisbeth and I had stood, and in almost the exact attitude—it

was desecration.

I stood stock still despite the Imp's frantic tugs at my coat, all other feelings swallowed up in one of half-amused resentment. Thus the resplendent footman happened to turn his head, presently espied me, and removing his plush-clad arm from the waist of the trim maid-servant, and doubling his fists, strode towards us with a truly terrible mien.

"And wot might your game be?" he inquired, with that supercilious air inseparable to plush and gold braid; "oh, I know your kind, I do—I know yer!"

"Then, fellow," quoth I, "I know not thee, by Thor, I swear it, and Og the Terrible, King of Bashan!"

"'Ogs is it?" said he indignantly, "don't get trying to come over me with yer 'ogs; no, nor yet yer fellers! The question is, wot are you 'anging round 'ere for?" Now, possibly deceived by my pacific attitude, or inspired by the bright eyes of the trim maid-servant, he seized me, none too gently, by the collar, to the horrified dismay of the Imp.

"Nay, but I will give thee moneys—"

"You are a-going to come up to the 'ouse with me, and no blooming nonsense, either, d'ye 'ear?"

"Then must I needs smite thee for a barbarous dog—hence—base slave—begone!" Wherewith I delivered what is technically known in "sporting" circles as a "right hook to the ear," followed by a "left swing to the chin," and my assailant immediately disappeared behind a bush, with a flash of pink silk calves and buckled shoes. Then, while the trim maid-servant filled the air with her lamentations, the Imp and I ran hot-foot for the wall, over which I bundled him neck and crop, and we set off pell-mell along the river-path.

"Oh, Uncle Dick," he panted, "how—how fine you are! you knocked yon footman—I mean, varlet—from his saddle like—like anything. Oh, I do wish you would play like this every night!"

"Heaven forbid!" I exclaimed fervently.

Coming at last to the shrubbery gate, we paused awhile to regain our breath.

"Uncle Dick," said the Imp, regarding me with a thoughtful eye, "did you see his arm—I mean before you smote him 'hip and thigh'?"

"I did."

"It was round her waist."

"Imp, it was."

"Just like Peter's."

"Yes."

"An' the man with the funny name?"

"Archibald's, yes."

"And mine," I put in, seeing he paused.

"Uncle Dick—why?"

"Ah! who knows, Imp—perhaps it was the Moon-magic. And now by my troth! 'tis full time all good knights were snoring, so hey for bed and the Slumber-world!"

The ladder was dragged from its hiding place, and the Imp, having mounted, watched me from his window as I returned it to the laurels for very obvious reasons.

"We didn't see any fairies, did we, Uncle Dick?"

"Well, I think I did, Imp, just for a moment; I may have been mistaken, of course, but anyhow, it has been a very wonderful night all the same. And so—God rest you, fair Knight!"

CHAPTER V.

THE EPISODE OF THE INDIAN'S AUNT

THE sun blazed down, as any truly self-respecting sun should, on a fine August afternoon; yet its heat was tempered by a soft, cool breeze that just stirred the leaves about my head.

The river was busy whispering many things to the reeds, things which, had I been wise enough to understand, might have helped me to write many wonderful books, for, as it is so very old, and has both seen and heard so much, it is naturally very wise. But alas! being ignorant of the language of rivers, I had to content myself with my own dreams, and the large, speckled frog, that sat beside me, watching the flow of the river with his big, gold-rimmed eyes.

He was happy enough I was sure. There was a complacent satisfaction in every line of his fat, mottled body.

And as I watched him my mind very naturally reverted to the "Pickwick Papers," and I repeated Mrs. Lyon-Hunter's deathless ode, beginning:—

Can I see thee panting, dying,
On a log,
Expiring frog!

(To be continued)