

"MY LADY CAPRICE"

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Illustrated by T. V. McCARTHY

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plunged into an account of the whole affair of the "ambushes," while Lisbeth, perched upon her lofty throne, surveyed us with an ever-growing astonishment.

"Whatever does it all mean?" she inquired as Mr. Selwyn made an end.

"You must know, then," I explained, leaning upon my quarterstaff, "the Imp took it into his head to become Robin Hood; I was Little-John, and Mr. Selwyn here was so very obliging as to enact the role of Sheriff of Nottingham—"

"I beg your pardon," exclaimed Mr. Selwyn indignantly, turning upon me with a fiery eye.

"Every one recollects the immortal exploits of Robin and his 'merrie men,'" I continued, "and you will, of course, remember that they had a habit of capturing the Sheriff and tying him up to trees and things. Naturally the Imp did not proceed to that extreme. He contented himself with merely capturing the Sheriff's hat—I think you will agree that those 'ambushes' worked like a charm, Mr. Selwyn?"

"Miss Elizabeth," he said, disdaining any reply, "I am aware of the affection you lavish upon your nephew; I hope that you will take measures to restrain him from such pranks—such very disgraceful pranks—in the future. I myself should suggest a change of companionship (here he glanced at me) as the most salutary method. Good-afternoon, Miss Elizabeth." So saying, Mr. Selwyn raised his hat, bowed stiffly to me, and turning upon an indignant heel, strode haughtily away.

"WELL!" exclaimed Lisbeth, with a look of very real concern.

"Very well, indeed!" I nodded; "we are alone at last."

"Oh, Dick! but to have offended him like this!"

"A highly estimable young gentleman," I said, "though deplorably lacking in that saving sense of humor which—"

"Aunt Agatha seems to think a great deal of him."

"So I understand," I nodded.

"Only this morning I received a letter from her, in which, among other things, she pointed out what a very excellent match he would be."

"And what do you think?"

"Oh, I agree with her, of course; his family dates back ages and ages before the Conqueror, and he has two or three estates besides Selwyn Park and one in Scotland."

"Do you know, Lisbeth, that reminds me of another house—not at all big or splendid, but of great age; a house which stands not far from the village of Down, in Kent; a house which is going to rack and ruin for want of a mistress. Sometimes just as evening comes on, I think it must dream of the light feet and gentle hands it has known so many years ago, and feels its loneliness more than ever."

"Poor old house!" said Lisbeth softly.

"Yes, a house is very human, Lisbeth, especially an old one, and feels the need of that loving care which only a woman can bestow, just as we do ourselves."

"Dear old house!" said Lisbeth, more softly than before.

"How much longer must it wait—when will you come and care for it, Lisbeth?"

She started, and I thought her cheeks seemed a trifle pinker than usual as her eyes met mine.

"Dick," she said wistfully, "I do wish you would get the ladder; it's horribly uncomfortable to sit in a tree for hours and—"

"First of all, Lisbeth, you will forgive the Imp—full and freely, won't you?"

"He shall go to bed without any tea whatever."

"That will be rank cruelty, Lisbeth, remember he is a growing boy."

"And I have been perched up here—between heaven and earth—all the afternoon."

"Then why not come down?" I inquired.

"If you will only get the ladder—"

"If you will just put your right foot in my—"

"I won't!" said Lisbeth.

"As you please," I nodded, and sitting down, mechanically took out my pipe and began to fill it, while she opened her book, frowning. And after she had read very studiously for perhaps two minutes, she drew out and consulted her watch. I did the same.

"A quarter to five!" I said.

Lisbeth glanced down at me with the air of one who is deliberating upon two courses of action, and when at length she spoke, every trace of irritation had vanished completely.

"Dick, I'm awfully hungry."

"So am I," I nodded.

"It would be nice to have tea here under the trees, wouldn't it?"

"It would be positively idyllic!" I said.

"Then if you will please find that ladder—"

"If you will promise to forgive the Imp—"

"Certainly not!" she retorted.

"So be it!" I sighed, and sat down again. As I did so she launched her book at me.

"Beast!" she exclaimed.

"Which means that you are ready to descend?" I

inquired, rising and depositing the maltreated volume side by side with my pipe on a rustic table nearby; "very good. Place your right foot in—"

"Oh, all right," she said quite pettishly, and next moment I had her in my arms.

"Dick! put me down—at once!"

"One moment, Lisbeth; that boy is a growing boy—"

"And shall go to bed without any tea!" she broke in.

"Very well, then," I said, and reading the purpose in my eyes, she attempted quite vainly, to turn her head aside.

"You will find it quite useless to struggle, Lisbeth," I warned. "Your only course is to remember that he is a growing boy."

"And you are a brute!" she cried.

"Undoubtedly," I answered, bending my head nearer her petulant lips. "But think of the Imp in bed, lying there, sleepless, tealess, and growing all the while as fast as he can."

Lisbeth surrendered, of course, but my triumph was greatly tempered with disappointment.

"You will then forgive him for the 'ambushes' and cherish him with much tea?" I stipulated, winking away a tress of hair that tickled most provokingly.

"Yes," said Lisbeth.

"And no bed until the usual hour?"

"No," she answered, quite subdued; "and now please do put me down." So I sighed and perforce obeyed.

She stood for a moment patting her rebellious hair into order with deft, white fingers, looking up at me meanwhile with a laugh in her eyes that seemed almost a challenge. I took a hasty step toward her, but as I did so the Imp hove into view, and the opportunity was lost.

"Hallo, Auntie Lisbeth!" he exclaimed, eyeing her wonderingly; then his glance wandered round as if in quest of something.

"How did she do it, Uncle Dick?" he inquired.

"Do what, my Imp?"

"Why, get out of the tree?" I smiled and looked at Lisbeth.

"Did she climb down?"

"No," said I, shaking my head.

"Did she—jump down?"

"No, she didn't jump down, my Imp."

"Well, did she—did she fly down?"

"No, nor fly down—she just came down."

"Yes, but how did she—"

"Reginald," said Lisbeth, "run and tell the maids to bring tea out here—for three."

"Three?" echoed the Imp. "But Dorothy has gone out to tea, you know—is Uncle Dick going to—"

"To be sure, Imp," I nodded.

"Oh, that is fine—hurrah, Little-John!" he cried, and darted off toward the house.

"An' did he 'swing people at the yard-arm—with a bitter smile?'"
"Lots of 'em!" I answered.



"And you, Lisbeth?" I said, imprisoning her hands, "are you glad also?"

Lisbeth did not speak, yet I was satisfied nevertheless.

CHAPTER III.

THE DESPERADOES

FANE COURT stands bowered in trees, with a wide stretch of the greenest of green lawns sloping down to the river stairs.

They are quaint old stairs, with a marble rail and carved balusters, worn and crumbling, yet whose decay is half hid by the kindly green of lichens and mosses; stairs indeed for an idle fellow to dream over on a hot summer's afternoon—and they were, moreover, a favorite haunt of Lisbeth. It was here that I moored my

boat, therefore, and now lay back, pipe in mouth and with a cushion beneath my head, in that blissful state between sleeping and waking.

Now, as I lay, from the blue wreaths of my pipe I wove me fair fancies:—

And lo! the stairs were no longer deserted; there were fine gentlemen, patched and powdered, in silks and satins, with shoe-buckles that flashed in the sun; there were dainty ladies in quilted petticoats and flowered gowns, with most wonderful coiffures; and there was Lisbeth, fairer and daintier than them all, and there, too, was I. And behold how demurely she curtsied and smiled behind her ivory fan! With what a grace I took a pinch of snuff! With what an air I ogled and bowed with hand on heart! Then, somehow, it seemed we were alone, she on the top stair, I on the lower. And standing thus I raised my arms to her with an appealing gesture. Her eyes looked down into mine, the patch quivered at the corner of her scarlet mouth, and there beside it was the dimple. Beneath her petticoat I saw her foot in a little pink satin shoe come slowly toward me and stop again. I watched, scarce breathing, for it seemed my fate hung in the balance. Would she come down to love and me, or—

"Ship ahoy!" cried a voice, and in that moment my dream vanished. I sighed, and looking around, beheld a head peering at me over the balustrade; a head bound in a bandanna handkerchief of large pattern and vivid coloring.

"Why, Imp!" I exclaimed. But my surprise abated when he emerged into full view.

About his waist was a broad-buckled belt, which supported a wooden cutlass, two or three murderous wooden daggers and a brace of toy pistols; while upon his legs were a pair of top-boots many sizes too large for him, so that walking required no little care. Yet on the whole his appearance was decidedly effective. There could be no mistake—he was a bloodthirsty pirate!

The Imp is an artist in his grimy finger-tips.

"Avast, shipmate!" I cried. "How's the wind?"

"Oh," he exclaimed, falling over his boots with eagerness, "do take me in your boat, an' let's be pirates, will you, Uncle Dick?"

"Well, that depends. Where is your Auntie Lisbeth?"

"Mr. Selwyn is going to row her and Dorothy up the river."

"The deuce he is!"

"Yes, an' they won't take me."

"Why not, my Imp?"

"'Cause they're 'fraid I should upset the boat. So I thought I'd come an' ask you to be a pirate, you know. I'll lend you my best dagger an' one of my pistols. Will you, Uncle Dick?"

"Come aboard, shipmate, if you are for Hispaniola, the Tortugas, and the Spanish Main," said I, whereupon he scrambled in, losing a boot overboard in his haste, which necessitated much intricate angling with the boat-hook ere it was recovered.

"They're Peter's, you know," he explained, as he emptied out the water. "I took them out of the harness-room; a pirate must have boots, you know, but I'm afraid Peter'll swear."

"Not a doubt of it when he sees them," I said as we pushed off.

"I wish," he began, looking round thoughtfully after a minute or so, "I wish we could get a plank or a yard-arm from somewhere."

"What for, my Imp?"

"Why, don't you remember, pirates always had a plank for people to 'walk,' you know, an' used to 'swing them up to the yard-arm.'"

"You seem to know all about it," I said as I pulled slowly down stream.

"Oh, yes; I read it all in 'Scarlet Sam, the Scourge of the South Seas.' Scarlet Sam was fine. He used to stride up and down the quarterdeck an' flourish his cutlass, an' his eyes would roll, an' he'd foam at the mouth, and—"

"Knock everybody into 'the lee scuppers,'" I put in.

"Yes," cried the Imp in a tone of unfeigned surprise. "How did you know that, Uncle Dick?"

"Once upon a time," I said, as I swung lazily at the sculls, "I was a boy myself, and read a lot about a gentleman named 'Beetle-browed Ben.' I tell you, Imp, he was a terror for foaming and stamping, if you like, and used to kill three or four people every morning, just to get an appetite for breakfast." The Imp regarded me with round eyes.

"How fine!" he breathed, hugging himself in an ecstasy.

"It was," I nodded; "and then he was a very wonderful man in other ways. You see, he was always getting himself shot through the head, or run through the body, but it never hurt Beetle-browed Ben—not a bit of it."

"An' did he 'swing people at the yard-arm—with a bitter smile?'"

"Lots of 'em!" I answered.

"An' make them 'walk the plank—with a horrid laugh?'"

"By the hundred!"

"An' 'maroon them on a desolate island—with a low chuckle?'"

(Continued on page 52)