

The ADVENTURES of MR. PETER RUFF PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

VI---A MODERN DELILAH

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Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, if still in England, is requested to communicate with "L.M." at Vagali's Library, Cook's Alley, Latham Street, S.H.

Peter Ruff laid the paper down upon his desk. His eyes were set in an unusually prospective stare. Who was this who sought to probe his past, to renew an acquaintance with a dead personality? "Maud" could be but one person! What did she want of him? Was it possible that, after all, a little flame of sentiment had been kept alive in her bosom, too—that in the quiet moments her thoughts had turned towards him as he had so often done to her?

Then a sudden idea—an ugly thought—drove the tenderness from his face. She was no longer Maud Barner—she was Mrs. John Dory, and John Dory was his enemy. Could there be treachery lurking beneath those simple lines? Things had not gone well with John Dory lately. Somehow or other his case seemed to have crumpled into dust. He no longer held the same esteem at Scotland Yard. Yet could even John Dory stoop to such means as these?

"He turned in his chair,"

"Miss Brown," he said, "please take your pencil."

"He marked the advertisement with a ring and passed it to her."

"Reply to that as follows," he said. "Dear Sir:

I notice in the Daily Mail of this morning that you are inquiring through the "personal" column for the whereabouts of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald. That gentleman has been a client of mine, and I have been in occasional communication with him. If you will inform me of the nature of your business, I may, perhaps, be able to put you in touch with Mr. Fitzgerald. You only understand, however, that, under the circumstances, I shall require proofs of your good faith."

Truly yours,

PETER RUFF.

Miss Brown glanced through the advertisement.

"Did you say—'Dear Sir'?" she asked.

"Certainly," Peter Ruff answered.

"She turned unwillingly her machine. Mr. Fitzgerald is very much better where he is," she remarked.

"That depends," he answered.

"Who do you suppose Mr. Fitzgerald is?" she asked.

"With your assistance," Peter Ruff remarked, "I shall require proofs of your good faith."

Miss Brown sniffed, and banged at the keys of her typewriter.

"That coal dealer's girl from Stratfordham!" she murmured to herself.

A few politely worded letters were exchanged. "Maud" was Maud Barner, from her identity, but made an appointment to visit Mr. Ruff at his office. The morning she was expected he was palpably nervous.

Miss Brown, who had arrived a little late, sat with her back turned to him, and ignored even his usual morning greeting. The atmosphere of the office was decidedly chilly. Fortunately, the expected visitor arrived early.

Peter Ruff rose to receive his former sweetheart with an agitation perhaps concealed, yet to him poignant indeed. For it was indeed Maud who entered the room and came towards him with careful and studied embarrassment and half doubtfully extended hand. He did not see the cheap millinery, the slightly more developed figure, the passing of that insipid prettiness which had been the bloom of an over early maturity. His eyes were blinded by that sort of masculine chivalry—the heritage only of fools and very clever men—which takes no note of such things. It was Miss Brown who, from her place in a corner of the room, ran over the cheap attractions of this unwelcome visitor with an expression of scornful wonder; who, appreciated, with merciless judgment, her unimpaired speech, her cheap flirtation method.

Maud, with a diffidence not altogether assumed, accepted the chair which Peter Ruff placed for her.

"I am sure, Mr. Ruff," she said, looking demurely into his lap. "I ought not to have come here. I feel terribly guilty. It's such an uncomfortable sort of position, too, isn't it?"

"I am sorry that you find it so," Peter Ruff said. "If there is anything I can do—"

"You are very kind," she murmured, "but you see, we are perfect strangers to one another. And I don't know me at all, do you? And I have only heard of you through the newspapers. You might think all sorts of things about my coming here to make inquiries about a gentleman."

"I can assure you," Peter Ruff said, sincerely, "that you need have no fears at all. Just speak to me quite frankly. Mr. Fitzgerald was a friend of yours, was he not?"

Maud smiled.

"He was more than that," she answered, looking down. "We were engaged to be married."

Peter Ruff sighed.

"I knew all about it," he declared.

"Fitzgerald used to tell me everything," she said.

"You were his friend?" she asked, looking him in the face.

"It was," Peter Ruff answered fervently. "His best friend!"

"She sighed.

"In some ways," she remarked softly, "you remind me of him."

"You could scarcely say anything," Peter Ruff murmured, "which would give me more pleasure. I am flattered."

"She shook her head.

"It isn't flattery," she said, "it's the truth. You may be a few years older, and Spencer had a very nice moustache, which you haven't, but you are really not unlike. Mr. Ruff, do tell me where he is!"

Peter Ruff coughed.

"You must remember," he said, "that Mr. Fitzgerald's absence was caused by events of a somewhat unfortunate character."

"I know all about it," she answered, with a little sigh.

"You can appreciate the fact, therefore," Peter Ruff continued, "that as his friend and well-wisher I can scarcely disclose his whereabouts without his permission. Will you tell me exactly why you want to meet him again?"

"She blushed—betrayed, in fact, all the love of recognition which might have been expected from her."

"I suppose," she whispered, "I suppose you are one of those who think it a crime for a woman who is married to even want to see, for a moment, an old sweetheart?"

"I am to understand, then," Peter Ruff remarked, "that your reason for wishing to meet Mr. Fitzgerald again is purely a sentimental one?"

"I am afraid it is," she murmured, "I have thought of him so often lately. He was such a dear! I have never been sufficiently thankful that he got away, that night. At the time I was very angry, but often since then I have wished that I could have passed out with him into the fog that 'Please don't misunderstand me, Mr. Ruff. I am happily married—quite happily married!'"

Peter Ruff sighed.

"I wonder," he said, "if you would do me the honor of lunching with me? We might go to Prince's or the Carlton—whichever you prefer. I will promise to talk about Mr. Fitzgerald all the time."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Maud declared, with a little gasp. "I'd love to go—but if we were seen! Wouldn't people talk?"

Peter Ruff smiled. "Just the same dear, modest little thing."

"I can assure you," he said, "that nothing whatever could be said against our lunching together. A married lady has always a great deal of latitude, you know."

"She looked up at him with a dazzling smile."

"I'd simply love to go to Prince's!" she declared.

"Cart," Miss Brown murmured, as Peter Ruff and his client left the room together.

Peter Ruff returned from his luncheon in no very jubilant state of mind. For some time he sat in his easy-chair, with his legs crossed and his fingertips pressed close together, looking steadily into space. Miss Brown watched him from behind her machine.

"Disenchanted?" she asked calmly.

"I am afraid," he admitted, hesitatingly, "that marriage with John Dory has—well, not had a beneficial effect. She allowed me, for instance, to hold her hand—she certainly did seem to have permitted a stranger to take such a liberty in the old days."

Miss Brown smiled curiously.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Which certainly did seem," he admitted, "to enjoy her champagne a great deal and she talked about her dull life at home a little more, perhaps, than was discreet to one who was presumably a stranger. She was curious, too, about dining out. Poor little girl, though. Just fancy, John Dory has never taken her anywhere but to the pit of a theatre!"

"What a treat is it to be?" Miss Brown asked.

"Something was said about Thursday," Peter Ruff admitted.

"And her husband?" Miss Brown inquired.

"He happens to be in Glasgow for a few days."

Miss Brown looked at her employer steadily.

"You," she said, "are you going to let that woman make a fool of you?"

"He raised his eyebrows.

"Go on," he said, "say everything you like, only, if you please, don't speak disrespectfully of Maud."

"Hasn't it ever occurred to you at all," Miss Brown continued, "that Maud, whatever you want to call her, may be playing a low-down game of her husband's?"

"He hated you, and he has vague suspicions. Can't you see that he is probably making use of your infatuation for his wife, to try and get you to give your life away to him?"

"I must admit," he answered, with a sigh, "that such a suspicion of the sort has interfered with my perfect enjoyment of the morning."

Miss Brown drew a little breath of relief.

"What are you going to do about it, then?" she asked.

Peter Ruff coughed.

"The subject of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald," he remarked, "seemed, somehow or other, to drop into the background during our interview. I propose, therefore, to continue to offer to Mrs. John Dory my most respectful admiration. If she accepts my friendship, and is satisfied with it, so much the better. I must admit that it would give me a great deal of pleasure to be her occasional companion—at such times when her husband happens to be in Glasgow!"

"And supposing," Miss Brown asked, "that this is not all she wants—supposing, for instance, that she persists in her desire for information concerning Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald?"

Ruff said mildly, "when you spoke."

"On their next meeting, however, Peter Ruff was forced to realize that his secret was no personal and sentimental secret for her former lover which had brought the fair Maud to his office. The pleasures of her evening were insufficient this time to keep her from recurring continually to the subject of her vanished lover. He tried strategy—jealously among other things.

"Supposing," he said, "supposing I were to induce our friend to come to London—"

"I imagine he would be fairly safe now if he kept out of your husband's way—what would happen to me?"

"Not at all," she answered promptly. "John Dory's face fell."

"Think again," he said, "I don't see any likeness," he said, rising to his feet. "You aren't a fool—not quite. You've spent some time with Peter Ruff. How much—think carefully—how much does he remind you of Spencer Fitzgerald?"

"Not at all," she answered promptly. "John Dory's face fell."

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IT WAS PETER RUFF WHO STOOD LOOKING IN UPON THEM.

"You," she murmured, glancing at him from behind her fan and then dropping her eyes.

"Certainly—me," he continued. "Don't you think that I should be doing myself a very ill turn if I brought you two together? I am quite sure that you still care for him."

"She shook her head.

"Not a single scrap," she declared.

"Then why did you put that advertisement in the paper?" Ruff asked, with a smooth but swift directness.

"He was not quick enough to parry his question. He read the truth in her disconcerted face. Knowing it now for a certainty, he hurried to her aid.

"Forgive me," he said, looking away. "I should not have asked that question. I will write to Fitzgerald. I will tell him that you want to see him, and that I think it would be safe for him to come to London."

Maud recovered herself quickly.

"And you needn't be jealous, really," she whispered behind her fan. "I only want to see him once for a few minutes—"

"I do," she answered. "I don't care what becomes of him."

John Dory, waiting patiently at home for his wife's return, felt a certain anxiety when she swept into his little sitting-room in all her cheap splendor, with flushed cheeks—an obvious air of satisfaction with herself and disdain for her immediate surroundings.

He looked at his wife with darkening face.

"Well," he remarked, grumblingly, "you seem to find a good deal of pleasure in this gadding about."

"If I do," she answered, "you are not the one to sit there and reproach me with it, are you?"

"It's gone far enough, anyway," John Dory said. "Understand me, Maud—it's finished! I'll find your old sweetheart for myself."

"You needn't trouble," she answered. "I am not such a fool as you seem to think me. Mr. Ruff has made an appointment with me."

"There was a change in John Dory's face."

"You mean that your friend Mr. Ruff is going to produce Spencer Fitzgerald?" he exclaimed.

"He has promised to," she answered.

"John," she declared, throwing herself into an easy chair, "I feel horrid about it. I wonder what Mr. Ruff will think when he knows."

"You can feel how you like," John Dory answered bluntly. "So long as I get the handcuffs on Spencer Fitzgerald's wrists!"

She shuddered. She looked at her husband with dismay.

"Listen to me, Maud," he said, rising to his feet. "You aren't a fool—not quite. You've spent some time with Peter Ruff. How much—think carefully—how much does he remind you of Spencer Fitzgerald?"

"Not at all," she answered promptly. "John Dory's face fell."

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"Not at all," she answered promptly. "John Dory's face fell."

He looked into his face long and carefully. Then he turned away, and, gripping his wife by the arm, he passed out of the room.

Violet Brown crossed the room to where Peter Ruff was still standing with a queer look upon his face, and, gripping him by the shoulders, shook him.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed. "How dare you! Do you know that I have nearly cried my eyes out?"

"Violet," he said, "you have known me for some years. You have been my secretary for some months. If you choose still to take me for a fool, I cannot help it."

"But," she exclaimed, pointing to Mr. James Fitzgerald.

Peter Ruff nodded.

"I have been practicing on him for some time," he said, with an air of self-satisfaction.

"A thin, mobile face, you see, and plenty of experience in the art of making up. It is astonishing what one can do if one tries."

Mr. James Fitzgerald picked up his hat and coat and went out.

"I was worth more than five hundred dollars," he said, "when I saw the lady who followed my spouse."

"You have earned the money," he said, "and you have it. Perhaps, Violet, you are a little inconsiderate. Come and have dinner with me, and forget it."

She drew a little sigh.

"You are sure," she murmured, "that you wouldn't rather take Maud?"

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