

"MY LADY

First Instalment of Our Great New Serial

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"Who can cope with the duplicity of a woman," I retorted. "But, Lisbeth, you will give me one—just one?"

CHAPTER I.

TREASURE TROVE



I SAT fishing. I had not caught anything, of course—I rarely do, nor am I fond of fishing in the very smallest degree, but I fished assiduously all the same, because circumstances demanded it.

It had all come through Lady Warburton, Lisbeth's maternal aunt. Who Lisbeth is you will learn, if you trouble to read these veracious narratives—suffice it for the present that she has been an orphan from her youth up, with no living relative save her married sister Julia and her Aunt (with a capital A)—the Lady Warburton aforesaid.

Lady Warburton is small and somewhat bony, with a sharp chin and a sharper nose, and invariably uses a lorgnette; also, she is possessed of much worldly goods.

Precisely a week ago Lady Warburton had requested me to call upon her—had regarded me with a curious exactitude through her lorgnette, and gently though firmly (Lady Warburton is always firm) had suggested that Elizabeth, though a dear child, was young and inclined to be a little self-willed. That she (Lady Warburton) was of opinion that Elizabeth had mistaken the friendship which had existed between us so long for something stronger. That although she (Lady Warburton) quite appreciated the fact that one who wrote books, and occasionally a play, was not necessarily immoral—still I was, of course, a terrible Bohemian, and the air of Bohemia was not calculated to conduce to that degree of matrimonial harmony which she (Lady Warburton) as Elizabeth's Aunt, standing to her in place of a mother, could wish for. That, therefore, under these circumstances my attentions were—etc., etc.

Here I would say in justice to myself that despite the torrent of her eloquence I had at first made some attempt at resistance; but who could hope to contend successfully against a woman possessed of such an indomitable nose and chin, and one, moreover, who could level a pair of lorgnettes with such deadly precision? Still, had Lisbeth been beside me things might have been different even then; but she had gone away into the country—so Lady Warburton had informed me. Thus alone and at her mercy, she had succeeded in wringing from me a half promise that I would cease my attentions for the space of six months, "just to give dear Elizabeth time to learn her own heart in regard to the matter."

This was last Monday. On the Wednesday following, as I wandered aimlessly along Piccadilly, at odds with Fortune and myself, my eye encountered the Duchess of Chelsea.

The Duchess is familiarly known as the "Conversational Brook" from the fact that when once she begins she goes on forever. Hence, being in my then frame of mind, it was with a feeling of rebellion that I obeyed the summons of her parasol and crossed over to the brougham.

"SO she's gone away?" was her greeting, as I raised my hat—"Lisbeth," she nodded, "I happened to hear something about her, you know."

It is strange, perhaps, but the Duchess generally does "happen to hear" something about everything.

"And you actually allowed yourself to be bullied into making that promise—Dick! Dick! I'm ashamed of you."

"How was I to help myself?" I began. "You see—"

"Poor boy!" said the Duchess, patting me affectionately with the handle of her parasol, "It wasn't to be expected of course. You see, I know her—many, many years ago I was at school with Agatha Warburton."

"But she probably didn't use lorgnettes then, and—"

"Her nose was just as sharp though—'peaky' I used to call it," nodded the Duchess. "And she has actually sent

Lisbeth away—dear child—and to such a horrid, quiet little place, too, where she'll have nobody to talk to but that young Selwyn—"

"I beg pardon, Duchess, but—"

"Horace Selwyn, of Selwyn Park—cousin to Lord Selwyn, of Brankesmere. Agatha has been scheming for it a long time, under the rose, you know. Of course, it would be a good match, in a way—wealthy, and all that—but I must say he bores me horribly—so very serious and precise!"

"Really!" I exclaimed, "do you mean to say—"

"I expect she will have them married before they know it—Agatha's dreadfully determined. Her character lies in her nose and chin."

"But Lisbeth is not a child—she has a will of her own, and—"

"True," nodded the Duchess, "but is it a match for Agatha's chin? And then, too, it is rather more than possible that you are become the object of her bitterest scorn by now."

"But, my dear Duchess—"

"Oh, Agatha is a born diplomat. Of course she has written before this, and without actually saying it has managed to convey the fact that you are a monster of perfidy; and Lisbeth, poor child, is probably crying her eyes out or imagining she hates you, is ready to accept the first proposal she receives out of pure pique."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed, "what on earth can I do?"

"You might go fishing," the Duchess suggested thoughtfully.

"Fishing!" I repeated, "—er, to be sure, but—"

"Riverdale is a very pretty place they tell me," pursued the Duchess in the same thoughtful tone; "there is a house there, a fine old place called Fane Court. It stands facing the river, and adjoins Selwyn Park, I believe."

"Duchess," I exclaimed, as I jotted down the address upon my cuff, "I owe you a debt of gratitude that I can never—"

"Tut, tut!" said her Grace.

"I think I'll start to-day, and—"

"You really couldn't do better," nodded the Duchess.

* * * * *

AND so it befell that upon this August afternoon I sat in the shade of the alders fishing, with the smoke of my pipe floating up into the sunshine.

By adroit questioning I had elicited from mine hosts of the Three Jolly Anglers the precise whereabouts of Fane Court, the abode of Lisbeth's sister, and guided by his directions, had chosen this sequestered spot, where by simply turning my head I could catch a glimpse of its tall chimneys above the swaying green of tree-tops.

It is a fair thing upon a hot summer's afternoon within some shady bower to lie upon one's back and stare up through a network of branches into the limitless blue beyond, while the air is full of the stir of leaves, and the murmur of water among the reeds. Or propped on lazy elbow, to watch perspiring wretches, short of breath and purple of visage, urge boats up stream or down, each deluding himself into the belief that he is enjoying it. Life under such conditions may seem very fair, as I say; yet I was not happy. The words of the Duchess seemed everywhere about me.

"You are become the object of her bitterest scorn by now," sobbed the wind.

"You are become," etc., etc., moaned the river. It was therefore with no little trepidation that I looked forward to my meeting with Lisbeth.

It was at this moment that the bushes parted and a boy appeared. He was a somewhat diminutive boy, clad in a velvet suit with a lace collar, both of which were beautifully bespattered with mud. He carried his shoes and stockings beneath one arm, and in the other hand swung a hazel branch. He stood with his little brown legs well apart, regarding me with a critical eye; but when at length he spoke his attitude was decidedly friendly.

"Hullo, man!"

"Hullo," I returned; "and who may you be?"

"Well," he answered gravely, "my real name is Reginald Augustus, but they call me 'The Imp.'"

"I can well believe it," I said, eyeing his muddy person.

"If you please, what is an imp?"

"An imp," I explained, "is a sort of an—angel."

"But," he demurred, after a moment's thought, "I haven't got any wings an' things—or a trumpet."

"Your kind never do have wings or trumpets."

"Oh, I see," he said; and sitting down began to wipe the mud from his legs with his stockings.

"Rather muddy, aren't you?" I hinted. The boy cast a furtive glance at his dragged person.

"FRAID I'm a teeny bit wet, too," he said, hesitatingly. "You see, I've been playing at 'Romans,' an' I had to wade, you know, 'cause I was the standard-bearer who jumped into the sea waving his sword an'

"MY Lady Caprice" will prove, without magazine has ever published. The his kind, the most outstanding writer of the carries with it, therefore, exhilaration. The enthusiasm. It lacks all problems, as they to-day, save the wholesome, amusing and heart cleverly written romance such as this. We are so heavily burdened with cares and sor-such as "My Lady Caprice," will serve as an made our decision against a war story and in

crying, "Follow me?" You remember him, don't you?—he's in the history book."

"To be sure," I nodded; "a truly heroic character. But if you were the Romans, where were the ancient Britons?"

"Oh, they were the reeds, you know; you ought to have seen me slay them. It was fine; they went down like—"

"Corn before the sickle," I suggested.

"Yes, just!" he cried; "the battle waged for hours."

"You must be rather tired,"

"Course not," he answered, with an indignant look.

"I'm not a girl—an' I'm nearly nine, too."

"I gather from your tone that you are not partial to the sex—you don't like girls, eh, Imp?"

"Should think not," he returned; "silly things, girls are. There's Dorothy, you know; we were playing at executions the other day—she was Mary Queen of Scots an' I was the headman. I made a lovely axe with wood and silver paper, you know; and when I cut her head off she cried awfully, an' I only gave her the weeniest little tap—an' they sent me to bed at six o'clock for it. I believe she cried on purpose—awfully caddish, wasn't it?"

"My dear Imp," said I, "the older you grow, the more the depravity of the sex will become apparent to you."

"Do you know, I like you," he said, regarding me thoughtfully. "I think you are fine."

"Now that's nice of you, Imp; in common with my kind I have a weakness for flattery—please go on."

"I mean, I think you are jolly."

"As to that," I said, shaking my head and sighing, "appearances are often very deceptive; at the heart of many a fair blossom there is a canker worm."

"I'm awfully fond of worms, too," said the Imp.

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I got a pocketful yesterday, only Auntie found out an' made me let them all go again."



He stood with his little brown legs well apart, regarding me, with a critical eye.

"Ah,—yes," I said, sympathetically; "that was the woman of it."

"I've only got one left now," continued the Imp; and thrusting a hand into the pocket of his knickerbockers out to me upon his small, grimy palm.

"He's nice and fat!" I said.

"Yes," nodded the Imp; "I caught him under the gooseberry bushes"; and dropping it back into his pocket he proceeded to don his shoes and stockings.

"Fraid I'm a bit muddy," he said suddenly.

"Oh, you might be worse," I answered reassuringly.

"Do you think they'll notice it?" he inquired, con-back.

"Well," I hesitated, "It all depends, you know."

"I don't mind Dorothy, or Betty the cook, or the governess—it's Auntie Lisbeth I'm thinking about."

"Auntie—who?" I exclaimed, regardless of grammar.

"Auntie Lisbeth," repeated the Imp.

"What is she like?"