

"My Lady Caprice"

By JEFFERY FARNOL

Illustrated by T. V. McCARTHY

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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 good-will 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 colours. Later, Mr. Selwyn fails to keep his engagement to take Lisbeth on 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 from whom Dick wins a kiss. While Lisbeth is asleep in an old boat, the Imp cuts the rope and sends her adrift down the river towards the weir. From this danger Dick rescues her at the risk of his own life.

which I have already mentioned once before.

I think such inns as this must extend some subtle influence on those who meet regularly within their walls—these Sons of the Soil, horny-handed, and for the most part grey of head and bent with overmuch following of the plough. Quiet of voice are they, and profoundly sedate of gesture, while on their wrinkled brows there sits that spirit of calm content which it is given so few of us to know.

Chief among these, and held in much respect, was old Jasper Trent. Within their circle he had been wont to sit ensconced in his elbow-chair beside the hearth, his by long use and custom, and not to be usurped; and while the smoke rose slowly from their pipe-bowls, and the ale foamed in tankards at their elbows, he would recount some tale of battle and sudden death—now in the freezing trenches before Sebastopol, now upon the blood-stained heights of Inkermann. Yet, and I noticed it was always towards the end of his second tankard, the old man would lose the thread of his story, whatever it might be, and take up the topic of "The B'y Jarge."

I was at first naturally perplexed as to whom he could mean, until Mr. Amos Baggett, the landlord, informed me on the quiet that the "B'y Jarge" was none other than old Jasper's only son—a man now some forty years of age—who, though promising well in his youth, had "gone wrong"—and was at that moment serving a long term of imprisonment for burglary; further, that on the day of his son's conviction old Jasper had had a "stroke," and was never quite the same after, all recollection of the event being completely blotted from his mind, so that he persisted in thinking and speaking of his son as still a boy.

"That B'y were a wonder!" he would say, looking round with a kindling eye; "went away to make 'is fortun' e did—oh! 'e was a gen'us were that B'y Jarge! You, Amos Baggett, were 'e a gen'us or were 'e not?"

"E were!" Mr. Baggett would answer, with a slow nod. "Look 'ee, sir, do 'ee see that their clock?"—and he would point with a bony, tremulous finger—"stopped stir a finger—dead it were! But that B'y Jarge 'e see it 'e did—give it a look over 'e did, an' wi' nout but 'is two 'ands set it a-going good as ever! You, Silas Madden, you remember as 'e done it wi' 'is two 'ands?"

"Is two 'ands!" Silas would repeat solemnly.

"An' it's gone ever sence!" old Jasper would croak triumphantly. "Oh! 'e were a gen'us were my B'y Jarge. 'E'll come a-marchin' back to 'is old feyther, some day, wi' 'is pockets stuffed full o' money an' bank-notes—I know—I know, old Jasper bean't a fule."

And herewith, lifting up his old, cracked voice, he would strike up "The British Grenadiers," in which the rest would presently join full lustily, waving their long-stemmed pipes in unison.

So the old fellow would sit, singing the praises of his scapegrace son, while his hearers would nod solemn heads, fostering old Jasper's innocent delusion for the sake of his white hairs and the medals on his breast.

But now he was down with "the rheumatics," and from what Lisbeth told me when I met her on her way to and from his cottage, it was rather more than likely that the high-backed elbow-chair would know him no more.

On the old fellow's illness, Lisbeth had promptly set herself to see that he was made comfortable, for Jasper was a lonely old man—had installed a competent nurse beside him, and made it a custom morning and evening to go and see that all was well.

It was this reason that I sat upon the Shrubbery gate towards nine o'clock of a certain evening, swinging my legs and listening for the sound of her step along the path. In the fulness of time she came, and getting off my perch, I took the heavy basket from her arm, as was usual.

"Dick," she said as we walked on side by side, "really I'm getting quite worried about that Imp."

"What has he been up to this time?" I inquired.

"I'm afraid he must be ill."

"He looked anything but ill yesterday," I answered reassuringly.

"Yes, I know he looks healthy enough," said Lisbeth, wrinkling her brows; "but lately he has developed such an enormous appetite. Oh, Dick, it's awful!"

"MY poor girl," I retorted, shaking my head, "the genus 'Boy' is distinguished by the two attributes, dirt and appetite. You should know that by this time. I myself have harrowing

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DON'T you think you ought to be punished?" He nodded. "Very well," I answered, "I'll punish you myself. Go and cut me a nice, straight switch," and I handed him my open penknife. Round-eyed, the Imp obeyed, and for a space there was a prodigious cracking and snapping of sticks. In a little while he returned with three, also the blade of my knife was broken, for which he was

profusely apologetic.

"Now," I said, as I selected the weapon fittest for the purpose, "I am going to strike you hard on either hand with this stick—that is, if you think you deserve it."

"Was Auntie Lisbeth nearly drowned—really?" he inquired.

"Very nearly, and was only saved by a chance."

"All right, Uncle Dick, hit me," he said, and held out his hand. The stick whizzed and fell—once—twice. I saw his face grow scarlet and the tears leap to his eyes, but he uttered no sound.

"Did it hurt very much, my Imp?" I inquired, as I tossed the stick aside.

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak, while I turned to light my pipe, wasting three matches quite fruitlessly.

"Uncle Dick," he burst out at last, struggling manfully against his sobs, "I—I'm awful—sorry—"

"Oh, it's all right now, Imp. Shake hands!" Joyfully the little, grimy fingers clasped mine, and from that moment I think there grew up between us a new understanding.

"Why, Imp, my darling, you're crying!" exclaimed a voice, and with a rustle of skirts, Lisbeth was down before him on her knees.

"I know I am—'cause I'm awful sorry—an' Uncle Dick's whipped my hands—an' I'm glad!"

"Whipped your hands!" cried Lisbeth, clasping him closer, and glaring at me. "Whipped your hands—how dare he! What for?"

"'Cause I cut the rope an' let the boat go away with you, an' you might have been drowned dead in the weir, an' I'm awful glad Uncle Dick whipped me."

"O-h-h!" exclaimed Lisbeth, and it was a very long-drawn "oh!" indeed.

"I don't know what made me do it," continued the Imp. "I 'specks it was my new knife—it was so nice an' sharp, you know."

"Well, it's all right now, my Imp," I said, fumbling for a match in a singularly clumsy manner. "If you ask me, I think we are all better friends than ever—or should be. I know I should be fonder of your Auntie Lisbeth even than before, and take greater care of her, if I were you. And—and now take her in to tea, my Imp and—and see that she has plenty to eat," and lifting my hat I turned away. But Lisbeth was beside me, and her hand was on my arm before I had gone a yard.

"We are having tea in the same old place—under the trees. If you would care to—to—would you?"

"Yes, do—oh do, Uncle Dick!" cried the Imp. "I'll go and tell Jane to set a place for you," and he bounded off.

"I didn't hit him very hard," I said, breaking a somewhat awkward silence; "but you see there are some things a gentleman cannot do. I think he understands now."

"Oh, Dick!" she said very softly. "And to think I could imagine you had done such a thing—you; and to think that you should let me think you had done such a thing—and all to shield that Imp? Oh, Dick! No wonder he is so fond of you. He never talks of any one but you—I grow quite jealous sometimes. But, Dick, how did you get into that boat?"

"By means of a tree with 'stickie-out' branches."

"Do you mean to say—"

"That, as I told you before, I dropped in, as it were."

"But supposing you had slipped?"

"But I didn't."

"And you can't swim a stroke!"

"Not that I know of."

"Oh, Dick! Can you ever forgive me?"

"On three conditions."

"Well?"

"First, that you let me remember everything you said to me while we were drifting down to the weir."

"That depends, Dick. And the second?"

"The second lies in the fact that not far from the village of Down, in Kent, there stands an old house—a quaint old place that is badly in want of some one to

live in it—an old house that is lonely for a woman's sweet presence and gentle, busy hands. Lisbeth!"

"And the third?" she asked very softly.

"Surely you can guess that?"

"No, I can't, and, besides, there's Dorothy coming—and—oh, Dick!"

"Why, Auntie," exclaimed Dorothy, as she came up, "how red you are! I knew you'd get sunburned, lying in that old boat without a parasol! But, then, she will do it, Uncle Dick—oh, she will do it!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE OUTLAW

EVERYBODY knew old Jasper Trent, the Crimean Veteran who had helped to beat the "Roosians and the Proosians," and who, so it was rumoured, had more wounds on his worn, bent body than there were months in the year.

The whole village was proud of old Jasper, proud of his age, proud of his wounds, and proud of the medals that shone resplendent on his shrunken breast.



I sat down, and as I did so she picked up the handkerchief and tucked it beneath the lace at her bosom.