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MISS CAPRICE.

BY ST. GEORGE RATHBONE

Author of "Doctor Jack," "Doctor Jack's Wife," "Captain Tom," "Miss Pauline of New York," Etc.

"I desire to speak a few words with you, Doctor John Craig." "Go on." "I beg your pardon—it must be in private." "In that case my friends will excuse me for a few minutes." "Oh! yes," replies Lady Ruth, looking at the bearer of the message again. "Certainly," says Blunt, promptly dropping into the chair, and his celerity to take advantage of the circumstance arouses a little suspicion in her mind that after all it may be a ruse to get him away, with the Briton's gold backing it.

She pays little attention to what the colonel is talking about; twice she turns her head and looks to where John and the stranger talk, while to herself she says: "Strange why I am interested in him and his fortunes. What is this singular story concerning his mother, which some time he means to tell me—when we become better friends? And now comes this man to hold a secret conversation with him! Where have I seen him before, where heard his voice? I cannot remember just now, but there is something familiar about him. The doctor appears to be excited—there he lays his well hand on the other's arm and speaks quickly. Pshaw! it's none of my business," and she resolutely turns her face toward the bright scene on the street, only to glance back again a dozen seconds later.

The doctor comes up; singularly enough, Lady Ruth has just bethought herself of her fan, and the military figure of the stalwart Briton is seen passing through the door-way upon a wild-goose chase after the much maligned article of ladies' yarfare, which has played its part in many a bit of diplomacy, and which he will never find as it is at that moment resting in the folds of milady's dress, cleverly hidden from view.

"I trust you have had no bad news, doctor?" says the English girl with a touch of sympathy in her voice. "On the contrary, Lady Ruth, I have heard something that is of intense moment to me," he replies, showing emotion. "About your mother?" she asks, quickly.

"It is so, Lady Ruth, you have heard me speak enough of my past to realize that it has been a lonely life. My father loves me after his own fashion, and I respect him deeply; but all my life I have longed for the love of a mother, until it has reached an in-

tensity you can not deny. Now I have received certain news that gives me a wild hope.

"I, too, lost my mother when young, and that circumstance enables me to feel for you."

Her tender eyes thrill him as he never yet has been touched; the bond of sympathy is akin to love; he has never had a confidant, and human nature yearns to unshrink itself.

"I promised to tell you the story, Lady Ruth. If I were sure we would not be interrupted, I would be inclined to speak now, for I am about starting upon a mission, the result of which Heaven alone can foresee."

His earnestness impresses her ladyship; trust a bright girl for bridging over a difficulty such as this.

"There is a little private parlor attached and generally empty," she suggests, artlessly.

"Just the ticket," he boldly exclaims. In a few minutes they are seated alone in this bijou parlor; its decorations are quaint, even barbaric, in their splendor, and a lover of the bizarre would happen upon such a scene with the keenest pleasure.

"Here are some drawings we can be looking over," she suggests, and he nods eagerly, inwardly blessing her ready sagacity.

Thus they look harmless enough. "Now I will play the lady confessor. What is it all about? Have you fallen into debt like a bad boy, and don't dare write the pater?"

He looks at her and laughs. "You see the comical side of every thing, Lady Ruth. This, I fear, bids fair to be a tragedy."

"A tragedy! Dear me, didn't we have quite enough of that this afternoon? What can it be? Surely you and the colonel—" and she colors furiously upon realizing how near she has come to betraying her thoughts.

"The colonel and I have had no rights, as yet, Lady Ruth. This affair is something that concerns my past. Let me briefly tell you a few facts that are of especial interest to me, and may claim your attention."

"I told you I had not seen my mother since I was a child, yet she is not dead. An unfortunate affair happened, and she was exiled from home. Heaven knows I have ever believed her innocent."

"On several occasions, unbeknown to my stern father, I have received a line without a signature, a line that called down Heaven's blessings on my head, a line that caused me to cry like a baby."

"Thus, year by year, my resolve became stronger; I would find my mother, I would seek the solution of the dreadful mystery that hangs over the Craig home."

"My studies were done; I graduated at the head of the medical class and spent a year under the most eminent professors at Heidelberg. When they gave me my diploma, they wrote my father that I ought to have a year of travel to improve my health before entering upon the life work to which I am devoted."

"Of course my desire was granted, and I began the search. I have been six months at it without success; it is like pursuing an ignis fatuus. A clue would take me to Russia, whence I would fly to Persia, then to Turkey, and next to London. In Paris I felt sure of success, but the lady I was tracking turned out to be a grandmother, and there was a lively scene in her house when I sprung my game."

"Talk of Japheth in search of his father! why, he wasn't in it at all, compared with me. At last came another clue; among the letters forwarded in a bunch from home was a line in the same precious hand. See, here it is."

He takes out from a note-book a slip of paper; the writing is elegant and feminine. She reads:

"January 12th. Just twenty years to-day. Oh! Heaven! teach me to kiss the rod."

No signature, only a mark like a tear drop.

"Now, you realize my position; you can, in a measure, understand the peculiar mingling of love, reverence and pity with which I think of this mother, and how the thought of her enters into every act of mine."

"Yes, yes, I do, indeed," sympathetically.

"I have sworn to find her—to let her know there is one who loves the poor exile. Let my father rage if he will, my heart burns to meet her. I will proceed. The letter was postmarked Malta, here at Valetta."

"But you did not mention—" "I knew the steamer would stop a few hours at least, and thought that might be enough in which to learn the truth. Strange things have happened since we landed. I have learned several facts which astound me."

"You saw a man come in and draw me aside? That man controls the destinies of these people of Valetta, even as a chief of police would in our cities. When first I landed I sought the presence of Luther Keene—"

"There, your mention of his name revives my recollection like a flash. Now I know just when and where I met that man," she says.

"He promised to assist me, for a consideration, of course, and was especially delighted at the chance to prove that even out here in Malta there might be a second Vidocq."

"In his first report he told me the party I sought had been in Valetta only recently, but he believed she was now gone."

"The man told me just now where Blanche Austin stayed during her residence here, at a house on the Strada Mezzodi, and I shall go as soon as I leave you to make enquiries there. If you are interested in my story, you might perhaps care to hear what news I may pick up on my visit to this house, which has so recently covered my mother."

"Indeed, I am more than interested in your story, and anxious to learn how you succeed. Would you know your mother if you should meet her to-day?" she asks, mentally wondering why he has taken her into his confidence.

"I believe so. A son's loving eyes would do much toward solving the problem."

"But your memory of her must be exceedingly hazy, to say the least." "That is true, but I have another clue. Once, when a boy, I was rummaging through some old papers in an antique secretary which I found in the attic, when I ran across an ivory miniature that had been overlooked."

(To be continued.)



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The Month of March

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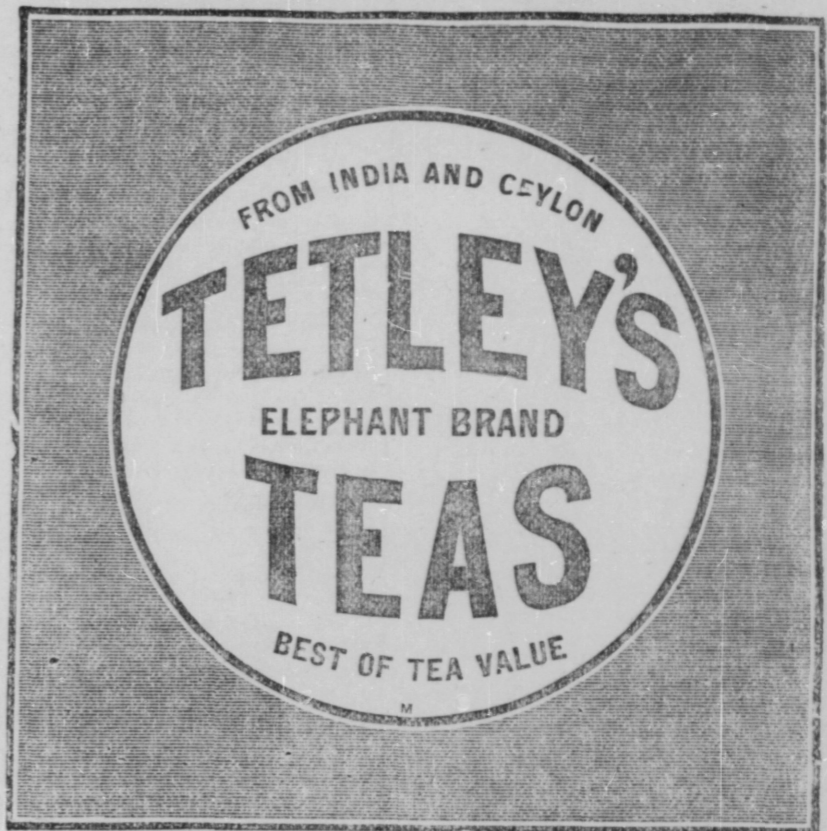
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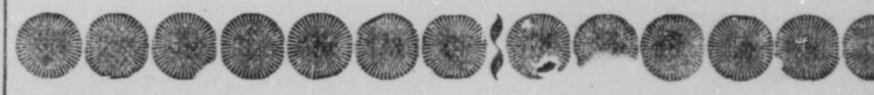
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