

The Captain's Book

By George Egerton

LET it be understood at the outset that this book was even more fateful to its author than the forgotten pamphlet of one John Stubbs, Puritan, whose right hand, with that of his publisher, was chopped off in the reign of the great Queen, yclept virgin, "wich is writ sarkastic."

The Captain, by courtesy, for he had never really attained to more than lieutenant's rank, and that, too, was due to a page in the book blurred by a woman's tears and a comrade's handgrip. It is not within my ken to say how the book was begotten, but I can vouch for the fact that it proved ever a barrier to the success of its author as a worth-while member of a tax-paying community.

It was with him as a laddie when he fished for troutlings in the mill-stream, or went birds'-nesting in the hedgerows. It floated as a nebulous magnetic spirit to lure him from set tasks in the dame school of his tender years, to play truant in pleasant meadows, with a stolen volume of forbidden lore in his satchel. It transformed every itinerant ballad-monger into a troubadour. It made the wooden-legged corporal who mended brogues between his drunken bouts, and told tales of the Peninsular and Waterloo, more wonderful than Prester John, and his feats greater than those of any hero of Northern Saga. It gave him, to the despair of tutor and parents,

parents, a leaning to the disreputable society of such members of gipsydom or the mummers' craft as paid flying visits with van or show to the town of his birth.

Was it begotten by the reading of his first romance, this desire that grew in him to write some day a great book, a book of which the world would ring, that would stir men's hearts to deeds of valour, and women's to vows of loyal love? Did it sleep in a cell of his brain at his birth, fateful inheritance of some roving ancestor, with a light touch on the harp and a genius of lying on his tongue?

When the dame school was abandoned for college, and the velvet cap with golden tassel and jean pantalettes with broidered frills ceded to cloth small clothes with gilt button and college cap, it still grew apace; and when it crept between his dryer tasks and let duller boys snatch prizes from his grasp, he whispered to himself that some day he would let them know why he had failed to be an easy first.

Years fled, the choice of a career became imperative; but ever the golden book with its purple letters on fairest vellum, its clasps of jacinth and opal, its pageant of knights, ladies, courtiers and clowns; martial strains and dim cathedral choirs with mystic calls; its songs of the blood, leering satyrs, and the seven deadly sins in guise of maidens fair; whispered distractingly to his inner ear. Indecision blinked at him with restless eyes and whispered many callings: Art held up a pencil and said: You who can limn each passing face, who are affectable to every shade of colour, can quicken the inanimate world by the light of your fancy, if you follow me. I am an arbitrary mistress, but in the end I will lead you through the gate of the Temple of Fame! And he was about to follow, when the skirl of pipes and the echo of marching feet, the flutter of pennants and strains of a music that roused to imperative life

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the instincts of the fighting man, lulled to slumber by centuries of peace, made him pause again. Visions of foreign lands, gallant deeds for country and for fame, adventures by sea and shore that would serve for the pages of the marvellous book, decided him to abandon his true mistress and follow the jade of war.

It became so closely interwoven with the fibres of his being that often it was hard to distinguish the existing from the imagined, and every fact of life borrowed a colour from its inscribing therein ; thus it came to pass, not seldom, that men listening to his narration of the happened by the light of their soberer reason, looked askance at his version and whispered to each other : "He is a liar" ; and when the pain of their misunderstanding had ceased to sting he told himself : "They too will understand when they read the book."

One career after the other was tossed aside at the turn to success, and those who had watched the opening days of the brilliant lad with the many gifts, turned their faces away when they met him, for they could not afford to know a wastrel of the chances of life.

Yet the Captain was rarely unhappy, for he alone conned the pages of the magic book, ever present to him, a growing marvel, in manhood as in childhood. When the girl of his early love, weary of waiting for the home that was to harbour her, distrustful of promises as lightly made as broken, turned from a world of vanities and unsatisfied yearnings to take the veil as a Sister of Mercy, it was a keen wound, soon to be treasured as a melancholy sweet episode in the romance of the book. So years sped by. The Captain married, and little children came with reckless frequency, episodes of gay insouciance ; materials of sorrow and pain, dark blots, with here and there a touch of shame accumulated to supply its tragedy and its truth.

Former schoolfellows, plodding boys of sparser talents who had
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kept a grip on the tool they had chosen, passed him in the race of life, and drove by his shabby lodgings in neat broughams, and forgot to greet him when they met.

What knew they of the witchery of the golden book, the hashish of its whisperings, the incidents crowding to fill it with all the experiences of humanity—a concordance of the soul of man? They merely looked upon him as belonging to the strange race of the sons of men who never work in the immediate present, but who lie in bed in the morning forming elaborate plans to catch a sea-serpent.

Debts increased, little children clamoured for food and raiment; yet the Captain, ever dreaming of his book, trod lightly and whistled through life, mellow in note as a blackbird; tired women stitching in narrow windows would lift their heads as they heard him pass, and think wistfully of bird song and hazel copse down country ways. Even when the wife of his choice, patient victim of his procrastinations, closed her tired eyes from sheer weariness, glad to be relieved of the burden of her sorrows, the Captain found solace in weaving her in as the central figure of his book—an apotheosis of heroic wifehood.

But the reaping must be as the sowing, and evil days must come with the ingathering: his clothes grew shabbier, his friends fewer, want rapped oftener at the door, gay romance gave place to sordid reality, and the sore places of life blotted the pages, as the plates in a book of surgery; dire necessity forced the Captain to woo the mistress he had jilted in early youth, but she laughed illusively. The old spirit had flown from the pencil, his fingers had lost their cunning, and younger men elbowed him out of the way; for a man who has spent his life in dreaming ever fails to grasp the “modern,” the changeful spirit of the day. As time went on the book became a subject of jest to his children, of good-natured raillery

raillery to his friends ; the boys and girls fought their separate ways, gathering educational manna from every bush ; and became practical hard-headed men and women of the world, with a keen eye to the main chance, a grip of the essentials of life, as befits the offspring of a dreamer.

Something of scorn for his failures, of contempt for his ideals, impatience with his shiftlessness, tinged their attitude to him always, and, spreading wider, their attitude towards every one who bore not the hall-mark of the world's estimate of success. What is the good of it, how much will it bring ? was their standard of worth.

Barney who had become a successful stockbroker, occasionally found the former acquaintanceship of the old guv'nor with sundry families of noble breeding of signal service to him. He never failed to make capital of the "old Dad's" intimate knowledge of salmon-fishing, or the best places to go in search of big game and the easiest way to get there. "A fellow whose father is a crack shot and an authority on salmon-fishing can't be quite a cad, don't you know !" young De Vere would urge when asking his governor to send City Barney an invitation.

Barney, in return, paid for the Captain's cheap lodgings, and gave him a hint that the "missus" only cared to see people on invitation, as the chicks asked awkward questions before her folk as to why grandpa lived in such a little house ? It didn't do ! The Captain would curl his grey moustache fiercely and turn to his pipe and book, and lay the one as it burnt out as a marker in the half-read page of the other, and close his eyes with a vehemence of intention that boded ill for the performance, to map out the chapters of the wonderful book.

Dick, who had inherited his facile invention, astounding memory, and his adaptive mercurial temperament, without any of his tenderness of heart, had taken successfully to journalism as a stepping-stone

stone to whatever might offer ; and when the *Piccadilly Budget* treated all the clubs to a merry half-hour by its piquant details of the early life of the latest created military baronet, or told how the great porter brewer's grandfather burnt the malt by accident and so laid the foundation to his fortune, or gave a most piquant version of an old scandal with modern touches as applicable to the newest woman writer, brother journalists were green with envy. Readers in the running said : "That's Dick O'Grady's par.," and wondered where the deuce the fellow picked up his facts. And Dick smiled at acquaintances with the winning smile that too was an inheritance from the Captain, and stopped his hansom to greet a club gossip useful to push him into the set he wished to enter, told him a rattling good story of the latest "star's" mother, whom he happened to know was a canteen woman in the Curragh in 1856, and was promised a card in return for Lady C.'s crush ; sometimes, too, he found a modernised version of the Captain's chivalrous manner to women of almost miraculous effect in conciliating the esoteric petticoat influence of some leading daily ; and, conscious of his debt, he would order a new dress suit and send the old boy half a sovereign with a letter bemoaning the shortness of "oof," and asking three questions no one else in London could answer him. His Sunday afternoon with the Captain was always profitably spent ; he gleaned stores of workable anecdotes, and if the stories he deftly drew out gained in malice as they lost in genial humanity, and the rennet of his cynicism turned sour the milk of human kindness that ran through the Captain's worst tale—well, he was the better latter-day journalist for that. Nowise deceived, the old man would pocket the stray shillings, and wash the taste of the interview down with a glass of his favourite Jamieson, swearing he would make that cub, with the mind of a journalising huckster, cry small when he published his book.

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As the sons, so the daughters.

Mary, who married well and lived in Lancaster Gate, sometimes took the children in a cab to see him ; but as her nurse's sister let apartments in the same terrace, she had to look after them herself, and that was too fatiguing for frequent repetition. Kitty, the black sheep of the family, who danced in burlesque, and showed her pretty limbs as Captain of the Guard, and her pretty teeth in her laughing song, stood to him best ; but even she was frankly sceptical at mention of the golden book : "Chuck it, dad, and write naughty anecdotes of celebrities for *Modern Society* or some of the papers ; nothing pays like scandal with just a grain of truth. Like some tickets for Thursday ? No ! Well, buy some baccy." And she would take her rustling petticoats and powdered, laughing face, and saucy eyes, into a hansom with ill-concealed relief.

They had all grown beyond him and his dreams. Their interests were frankly material ; they were keenly alive to his faults, his subterfuges, his poor, sometimes mean, shifts to make ends meet ; his silly reverence for everything that wore a gown, his wasted talents that might have served their advancement ; they resented him as a failure, and they let him know it.

One thing solely they were blind to, Dick as well as Barney (which was the less excusable, seeing how like the chip was to the block), level-headed Mary as easy-going Kitty—that they themselves were the result of the very faults they condemned. Their acute sense of essentials, their world-insight, their calculating fore-thought, each of the very qualities that assured their success in the world of their desires was built up on the solid foundation of sordid experience his make-shift life had brought in its wake. His improvidence had taught them the value of money, his happy-go-lucky procrastination the need of immediate action ; he had been an unconscious object lesson to them from their tenderest

tenderest years, of the things to avoid unless a man wish to fail in life.

The Captain saw it clearly enough, and sometimes a tiny flame of his old spirit would flicker to life, and he would register a vow to begin the next day—perhaps he would make ready a couple of quills, dust his old desk, lay out some foolscap, and put away treasured letters from old comrades—his correspondence of late was infrequent—and whisper with a smile : “To-morrow !” He would cock his old hat jauntily and nod to Jeanet, his landlady’s little daughter, and go on to the common with a paper and a pipe, and lose himself in a happy dream of a glorious first chapter ; a marvel of psychological insight into the life of a child, in which youth and love, and the tender colours of hope and faith, would make young readers’ eyes glow and old readers’ eyes glisten. Later on, Jeanet, coming to seek him, would find him asleep with his chin on his stick. She was a wise little maid, with the worldliness that is such a pitiful side of London childhood, clever and practical, with a strange affection for the old gentleman who treated her so courteously and called her “My pretty Jane,” and was a mine of wonderful lore. She was fiercely jealous of his stuck-up sons and daughters, and resented their treatment with the keen intuition and loyal devotion of childhood.

“Wake up, Captain ; you shouldn’t go to sleep like that !” with quaint reproof. “Supper is ready, and I’ve got a new book !”

“Have you, my pretty ? I, too, was dreaming of my book, and to-morrow I must begin. ‘I am growing old, Jeanette.’ Lord, how divinely poor Paddy Blake used to sing that song. Yes, it’s time to begin !”—with a sigh.

The child, a lanky, precocious thing of thirteen winters, in whom he alone had seen a promise of beauty, and whose rare intelligence

intelligence he had striven to cultivate, was silent. Is it not of this book, his book, of which he has told her so often in the long evenings when they have sat together, when the mother has gone with Susie to a south-west music hall, that she has been thinking? Has she not learnt by heart the story of the youth and man, the lady—so wondrous a white lady surely never lived in fiction before—of the gentle nun tending wounded men in the wake of war and pestilence, of gallant “sojer” friends, witch-women with amber locks, little children buried at sea, and racy tales, expurgated for her hearing, of camp and bar? Is she not the only one who ever believed implicitly in its greatness and fulfilment? No wonder a plan grew in her little head, and now she has almost carried it to completion. She hurried the old man in, only to note with dismay how feeble his steps, how laboured his breathing had become; and from that day she redoubled her watchfulness of his needs.

Some days later, Dick, sauntering up the Strand from one of his numerous paper offices, was waylaid by an odd little maid with resentful eyes, who gave him a piece of her mind with the uncompromising bluntness of youth. She was too in earnest for him to resent it; besides, she interested him; he had been seeking a type of child-girl for a curtain-raiser, and she hit it off to the life. He watched each expressive gesture, each trick of emphasis and quaintness of idiom, noting them mentally for use; he talked of himself to draw her out.

“Don’t you tell me you got to work ‘ard”—in spite of the Captain’s pains she lapses into her old ways of speech when strongly moved—“you go about in ‘ansoms and wear expensive flowers in your button ‘ole, an’ the Captain ’e wants strengthenin’ things ’e don’t ’ave. I thought I’d tell you, if I was to be killed for it.”

And Dick smiled and promised to send a cheque next day,
honour

honour bright!—in reply to her distrustful look, adding: “ You’ll write and tell me how he is ! ”

Jeanet waved her hand from the top of her ‘bus, and Dick bared his head as to a duchess, and invented a lie on the spur of the moment in reply to the enthusiastic query of an artist friend who had seen the parting: “ Who’s the girl with the singular face ? ” Dick’s lies were always entertaining, and he never made the mistake of lying about things that might be found out.

The cheque arrived, the Captain’s spirits rose with his renewed health, and Jeanet came into his room one evening with an air of triumph. Her thin cheeks were flushed with eagerness, and she held something carefully wrapped up in tissue paper. The old man laid down his pipe and his well-thumbed Sterne with a sigh, and watched her with an amused twinkle in his faded old eyes. Jeanet undid it carefully, and displayed a gorgeous scarlet-bound book with gilt-edged leaves.

“ See, Captain,” handing it to him with a little air of solemnity, as if she were investing him with some strange order, “ here it is ! ”

He, falling into her mood, took it solemnly, turned to the back—no title, just a square of gilt lines; opened it—clean unwritten pages.

Jeanet had been watching his face, and a delighted smile broke over hers at his look of wondering question.

“ An album, Jeanette? I must do you a little sketch in it ! ”

“ No, Captain, it is not for me ; it is for you. *It’s for the book.* I got it on purpose, my own self, from Sophy’s young man—he’s a bookbinder ; and now you must really and truly begin. I’m sorry it’s not purple and gold, with those lovely clasps, you said ; but afterwards, when it’s written, you can have one like that.” And, sliding up to his chair, and flicking a speck of dust off his shabby coat,

coat, " You'll begin it now, won't you ? There is really a book inside your head ; it isn't a fairy tale you made up just for me, is it ? And you'll make a great name, and they'll put your picture in the papers, and all about you, and I'll cut out all the pieces and make an album, like Sophy does with her notices. She had a lovely one in the *Charing Cross Gazette*. The young man who wrote it owed mother rent, and she let him off for getting it in. And then when your sons know you have really made the book—they don't believe in it," with a note of scorn—"they'll want to take you away, but you won't forget as how little Jeanet gave you the book to write it in, will you ?"

The Captain blew his nose and wiped his glasses, and kissed the little maid, and patted her head, and called her his little comfort, and promised her a whole chapter to herself ; and to-morrow he would begin—without fail, to-morrow. Then he invited Jeanet to supper, and they decided upon fried fish and baked potatoes, and Jeanet laid the table-cloth, and he put on his threadbare overcoat and she her hat, and they went out joyous as only children at heart can be. The Captain chaffed the busy stout women frying the pieces a golden brown, and insisted on carrying the basket. Jeanet was careful not to get re-roasted potatoes, and gave the old man a wise little lecture because he bade a rogue of a news-boy to keep the halfpenny change from an evening paper ; and he bought her a bunch of ragged bronze-brown chrysanthemums, and she tried hard to see that they were prettier than the close magenta ones.

They supped merrily, and whilst she mixed his punch for him he unlocked an old workbox, and found her a little silver fish, with a wagging tail, that had once served the dear white lady as a tape-measure ; and then she sat at his feet and he told her more wonderful stories of bygone days, but he lost the thread of his

story

story at times, and names bothered him ; sometimes, too, the tears welled up and his lips trembled under his old grey moustache, and his hand shook as he rubbed his glasses, and though the fires had not long begun nor the chestnut roasters taken up their winter places, and it seemed only a few weeks back that delicate spirals of smoke rose up from all the squares, with a pungent smell of burning leaves—surest London token of the coming of the fall—the old man sat huddled over the fire. His little friend, who had seen most of the serious sides of life, observed him anxiously as she whispered good-bye with her “good-night.”

“For I am going to Aunt Sarah’s for a week, and I wish I wasn’t going, Captain dear, but I’ll write to you. I’ve filled the inkpot fresh and put a hassock for your feet, and told Bessie to mind your fire, and when I come back you’ll read me all you have written in the book.”

The old man, seeing her face clouded, promised her with forced gaiety to work like a Trojan, and kissed her little red hand with a touch of old-time grace.

Five days later Jeanet got a shakily written letter in reply to hers, with a comical little sketch of the Captain surrounded by icebergs, with icicles hanging from his beard ; he wrote that he missed her, felt seedy, but to-morrow surely he would be better, and then he would write. Jeanet declared resolutely she must go home, and the next day when the shadows were gathering thickly and the lamplighter trotted from street to street, and the tinkle of the muffin bell told the hour of tea, the little maid surprised her family by her advent :

“How is the Captain ?” was her first question.

“Indeed he’s only middlin’. Bessy took him some gruel at dinner-time and made up the fire, for he said he was going to write

write,'an' he asked about you. La, she do make a fuss about the Captain," she added to a crony, in for a gossip.

Jeanet stole upstairs, paused outside the door with a strange disinclination to enter. She knocked twice with caught breath ; no sound reached her from inside. She entered ; the cheap coal had burnt out to slate and grey white ash ; the shadows filled the room, accentuating the strange quiet. The Captain sat a little to one side with his chin sunk on his breast and his old hands folded on the closed book ; the quill pen shone whitely on the floor where it had dropped to his feet. Some sudden spell of awe kept Jeanet from touching the silent figure, and checked the cry of "Captain" on her lips. She went out, fetched in the lamp from the bracket on the landing and turned it up to its full height—gave one look, and uttered a long cry that brought them hurrying up from below, and woke the lodger's baby on the floor above.

And whilst they clustered round his chair and felt his heart and talked volubly of doctor and telegrams, Jeanet took the book reverently from under his hand, and hugging it to her breast burst into tears—to her alone it was of signification, had not his own always made a jest of it ?

"He would get up, the pore gentleman, he was fair set on writin' in his book ; I left 'im sittin' with the pen in 'is 'and," cried the girl.

When the ghastly details had been carried out and the Captain lay with a restful smile on his face, and sons and daughters had been and gone, and the undertaker's young man was talking it over in the kitchen, Jeanet stole with swollen lids and pinched features to the bedside of her best friend—to open the book. It had escaped every one's thought, but she had lain awake all night thinking of the wonderful tale it must hold, for the Captain, Bessy said, had sat with it upon his knee each day since her departure

departure. How she regretted having gone away, her dear Captain—well as the lips that had told her many of its wonders were silenced for ever, she would read it here, at his side, before they laid him away for ever.

She bolted the door and knelt down with a light on her face of faith and devotion. She opened the wonderful book—paused at the title with a look of surprise—turned the pages with eager fingers—all fair, all unsullied—and in trembling letters across the title-page of the golden book, that had been alike the dream of his life and its fate—his own name.