ST. GEORGE RATHBORNE

MISS CAPRICE

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Miss Caprice

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CHAPTER I.

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"COWARD!"

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A little party of tourists might be seen one lovely day in January, on the hill back of the city of Valetta, on that gem of Mediterranean islands, Great Britain's Malta.

The air is as clear as a bell, and the scene is certainly one to charm the senses, with the blue Mediterranean, dotted with sails, a hazy line far, far away that may be the coast of Africa, the double harbor below, one known as Quarantine, where general trade is done, the other, Great Harbor, being devoted to government vessels.

Quaint indeed is the appearance of the Maltese city that rests mostly upon the side of the hill under the fortifications, a second Quebec as it were.

The streets are, some of them, very steep, the houses, built of limestone, generally three stories in height, with a flat roof that answers the same purpose as the Spanish or Mexican *azotea*.

Valetta has three city gates, one the Porta Reale, through which our little tourist group came to reach their present position, leads to the country; the Porta Marsamuscetto to the general harbor where lie craft of all nations, while the government harbor is reached by means of the Marina gate.

Thus they hold to many of the ways of Moorish and Mohammedan countries.

The fortifications of limestone are massive—England has a second Gibraltar here.

In general, the Maltese speak a language not unlike the Arabic, though English and Italian are used in trade.

They are a swarthy, robust, fearless people, strong in their loves and hates, and the vendetta has been known to exist here just as fiercely as in its native home of Corsica.

Many dress in the costume of the Franks, but the native garb is still worn by the lower classes, and is a picturesque sight, such as we see upon the stage.

It consists of a long bag made of wool, and dyed various colors, making a cap such as is worn by the sailors in stage scenes like the "Pirates of Penzance."

The top part of this is used for a purse, or forms a receptacle for any small articles the wearer desires to carry.

A short, loose pantaloon, to the knee, which leaves the lower leg bare, is confined at the waist by a girdle or sash of colored cotton or silk. Then there is worn a cotton shirt, with a short, loose vest, or waistcoat, as they were formerly known, covering the same; the latter often ornamented with rows of silver buttons, quarter-dollars, or English shillings.

As to the ladies of Malta, their costume is very odd, and reminds one somewhat of Spain. In part, it consists of a black silk petticoat, bound round the waist, over a body of some other kind of silk or print which is called the *half onuella*. The upper part, the *onuella*, of the same material, is drawn into neat gathers for the length of a foot about the center of one of the outer seams. In the seam of one of the remaining divisions is inclosed a piece of whalebone, which

is drawn over the head, and forms a perfect arch, leaving the head and neck bare.

As may be expected, it requires much practice to wear such a dress gracefully. Many of the best ladies of Valetta now get their fashions direct from Paris—so the world moves.

The little party of tourists have ascended the hill for the purpose of obtaining the glorious view referred to, and at the same time whiling away a few hours of time, for their stay at the Island of Malta has not been of their choosing, a peculiar accident causing the steamer on which they were taking passage to put in here for some necessary repairs.

The tourists are five in number, and a very brief description will give the reader an idea as to their identity, leaving individual peculiarities to be developed as our story progresses.

Probably the one that would attract the attention of a stranger first would be the young lady with the peach-bloom complexion and sunny blue eyes, whose figure is so stylish, and whose rather haughty manner bespeaks proud English blood.

There is another female, whom the young lady calls Aunt Gwen, and as a specimen of a man-female she certainly takes the premium, being tall, angular, yet muscular, and with a face that is rather Napoleonic in its cast. A born diplomat, and never so happy as when engaged in a broil or a scene of some sort, they have given this Yankee aunt of Lady Ruth the name of Gwendolin Makepeace. And as she has an appendage somewhere, known as a husband, her

final appellation is Sharpe, which somehow suits her best of all.

Aunt Gwen is a character to be watched, and bound to bob up serenely, with the most amazing assurance, at unexpected times.

Then there is Sharpe, her worse half, a small gentleman over whom she towers, and of whom she is secretly fond in her way, though she tyrannizes him dreadfully.

Near him may be seen a young American, whom they have somehow dubbed "Doctor Chicago," because he is a medical student hailing from that wonderful city, by name John Alexander Craig. Among his friends he is simply Aleck. His manner is buoyant, and he looks like an overgrown boy, but his record thus far proves his brain to contain that which will some day cause him to forge ahead.

No one knows why Craig is abroad. That he has some mission besides a tour for health and sight-seeing, several little things have proved.

There is another member of the group, a gentleman of sturdy build, with a handsome face, whose ruddy tint suggests the English officer, even without the flowing whiskers.

Colonel Lionel Blunt has seen much service in India and around Cape Colony. He gained an enviable reputation for deeds of valor, and is disposed to look upon our friend from Chicago as an amiable boy, though after seeing how they rush things out in that Western metropolis he may have occasional qualms of fear lest this young doctor finally reach the goal for which both are aiming. That goal, any one can see, is the favor of the bright English girl whom fate has

thrown in their way. Perhaps it is not all fate, since Colonel Lionel has recently crossed the States coming from India, and seems to pursue Lady Ruth with singular pertinacity.

Others are present, one a Maltese gentleman, the proprietor of a select club-house, where the garrison officers fence and engage in gymnastics, but Signor Giovani is not of our party.

There are also several commissionaires or guides, at five francs a day, for one cannot move at Malta without being attended, and it is wise to engage one cicerone to keep the rest of his tribe at bay.

Thus, on the hill above the singular Maltese city of Valetta, our story opens.

Aunt Gwen is sweeping a field-glass around, and emphasizing her admiration of the picturesque scene with various phrases that would immediately give her away as a Western Yankee.

Lady Ruth, with an admirer on each side, looks a trifle tired, or, it may be, bored.

She may be planning some innocent little scheme, such as girls are wont to indulge in when they have a superfluity of beaus, in order to extract some amusement from the situation, even if it come under the head of "cruelty to animals."

Philander Sharpe, with his hands under the tails of his long coat, and his glasses pushed up on his forehead, is a study for a painter.

He was once a professor in a Western college, and with his smooth face, hair reached up from his high forehead, standing collar, and general dignified air, is no mean-looking

figure, though dwarfed into insignificance by the side of his spouse, the wonderful Aunt Gwen.

The conversation runs upon what lies there before them, and an animated discussion arises as to the possibility of a foreign enemy ever being able to successfully assault this second Gibraltar of the Mediterranean.

Of course, the young American is enthusiastic, and has unbounded faith in the new White Squadron to accomplish anything, while, on the other hand, the British officer, like most of his class, believes that John Bull is invincible on land or wave. Of course, the young man from Chicago disputes the point, and energetically contends that no nation is superior to the Republic, or that any flag can be more desperately defended than "Old Glory."

And right in the midst of the heated discussion Lady Ruth smiles, as though she has suddenly hit upon an idea at last —an idea that offers a solution to the problem that has been perplexing her of late, concerning the courage of these rival admirers.

She turns to the American, and smiles sweetly.

"Doctor, you speak of your countrymen being brave; will you prove it?" is what she says.

The young man turns a trifle red.

"I beg your pardon. In speaking of Americans I did not intend to sound my own praises. Personally, I never claimed more than the average amount of boldness, though I don't know that I was ever called a coward."

His manner is modest, but the young girl with English ideas chooses to look upon his words with suspicion.

"Doctor Chicago must not take water. I have surely understood him to be a regular fire-eater—that all Chicago has rung with his escapades," says the colonel of Royal Engineers, sneeringly.

"Nonsense! But, Lady Ruth, you spoke of my proving something—what can I do for you?"

"Look!"

She extends a shapely arm. Her finger points to a white flower growing out upon the face of the precipice beside them.

"Do you see that flower?" she asks.

"I do," he replies, calmly.

"I would like to possess it."

The young man looks down. A fall means instant death, and it would be impossible for even an experienced Alpine traveler to pass along the face of the rock in safety.

"I see no means of reaching the flower, or I assure you I would gladly secure it for you."

"Ah! but a bold man would climb out there."

"Pardon—he would be a fool—his life would pay the penalty for a pretty girl's whim. Unfortunately, perhaps, my life is too precious to some one other than myself, to admit of the sacrifice. I am willing to do much for Lady Ruth, but I decline to be made a fool of."

"Well spoken," begins the professor.

"Philander!" exclaims his spouse, and the little man draws in his head very much after the style of a tortoise.

"Coward!"

The English girl is sorry as soon as the low word leaves her lips. No one hears it but the young doctor, for the

attention of all the others is at that time directed elsewhere.

This time the object of her scorn does not flush, but turns very white, as he looks her steadily in the eyes.

"I am sorry you have such a poor opinion of me, Lady Ruth. I make no apologies, save the one that my life is too valuable—to others, to myself—to throw it away at the mere caprice of a girl."

"There is a gentleman who finds a way to accomplish what he wants. Take a lesson from him, Doctor Chicago," she says.

Colonel Lionel has noticed a long pole near by, in the end of which is a cleft. This he has secured, and, by crawling as far as is safe along the face of the rock, he is enabled to just reach the flower.

After a number of ineffectual lunges he succeeds in clutching the coveted article in the cleft of the pole, and draws it toward him.

A moment later he presents the flower to Lady Ruth, with a smile and a bow.

"No English lady ever expressed a wish that a British officer did not feel bound in honor to grant," he says.

The girl thanks him, and then says:

"After all, the flower was prettier at a distance than when in my hands."

Colonel Lionel hardly knows whether he has made such a huge advance over his rival after all.

The afternoon sun is waning.

"We must go down," declares Aunt Gwen.

"One more look around and I am ready," says Lady Ruth.

Already she is sorry for her cruel words. Like the best of women, she can wound at one moment and be contrite the next. She finds an opportunity a minute later, when the colonel lingers to get the shawl she—perhaps purposely—left behind, to say in a low tone:

"I was cruel—forgive me—forget that foolish word," and while what she utters gives him a pleasurable feeling, and brings the color into his set face, he only smiles, as he answers:

"Willingly, Lady Ruth. I did not believe you could mean it."

Then, as the colonel bustles up, the subject is tabooed, and the party of tourists proceed down the steep street leading to the Hotel Imperial.

CHAPTER II.

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A DEADLY ENCOUNTER.

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The scene, so peaceful, so picturesque, is rudely broken in upon by a clamor so strange and awful that the blood is chilled in the listeners' veins. Cries are heard down the steep street; cries that indicate alarm, even terror; cries that proceed from children, women, ay, and strong men, too.

Our party comes to a halt midway between the brow of the hill and the base. On either side tall houses, the declivity ending only at the water. It is a bustling street at all hours, with loungers, business men, women going to and returning from market, and children playing as children do the world over, in the dirt.

"What can it mean?" says Lady Ruth, as she looks breathlessly down the street.

No one in their party can explain the cause of the excitement. They see people running madly this way and that, as if panic-stricken.

"By Jove! it must be a fire!" suggests the colonel, twirling his whiskers.

"Nonsense! we should see the smoke," declares sensible Aunt Gwen.

"You are right; it is something more than a fire. Those people are almost crazed. I've seen such a sight in Chicago, when a wild Texan steer got loose and tossed things right and left," asserts the medical student.

"That's what's the matter. See! they point at something as they run! Look out for the bull!" cries Philander.

Thus, in watching for a bulky frame to appear, they fail to notice the actual cause of the disturbance.

The street is almost deserted, save where people begin to reappear below, as though the danger were past, to reappear and shout afresh as they wave their arms.

Some one is shouting close to them now. They turn their heads and behold the crowd of commissionaires dashing headlong for the shelter of adjacent houses, and acting like crazy men.

It is Signor Giovani who shouts, first in Arabic, then in Italian, and finally in English. They hear him now, and no wonder the blood runs cold in their veins—it is a cry to alarm the boldest warrior on earth.

"Mad dog! Run, signors!—save the ladies! To the houses, or you are lost!"

That is what the old fencing-master of Malta shouts while he retreats. It causes them to turn their heads, and what do they see? Advancing up the middle of the inclined street, turning aside for neither king nor peasant, comes a great gaunt beast, his square head wagging from side to side, his eyes blood-shot, and the foam dropping from his open jaws.

Heavens! What a spectacle to rivet one with horror to the spot. Fortunately there are some people of action present.

Aunt Gwen clutches her *infant* by the shoulder, and drags him along in the direction of the nearest house.

"Run, Philander, or you're a goner! It's worse than snake poison, the bite of a mad dog is. Haven't I seen a bitten man

so furious that it required six to hold him down? Faster, professor! on your life!"

With that iron grip on his shoulder poor Philander's feet barely touch the ground as he is whirled through space, and the dog, mad or not, that overtakes Aunt Gwen and her infant must be a rapid traveler, indeed. Thus they reach a house, and in another minute reappear upon a balcony, to witness a scene they will never forget.

Lady Ruth, though naturally quivering with excitement, has plenty of cavaliers to hurry her to a place of safety. Besides, after that one first shock, she shows more grit than might have been expected of her.

She allows herself to be hurried along. A strong hand grasps each arm; and if every one in the path of the mad brute were as well attended, there would be little cause for anxiety or alarm.

Now they have reached a house, and safety is assured, for the hospitable door stands open to welcome them.

Already a number have preceded them, for they seem to be the last in the vicinity.

Just as they arrive, the colonel, who appears intensely excited, is saying, hoarsely:

"Enter quickly, I beg, Lady Ruth."

She turns her head in curiosity for one last look, impelled by an unknown power—turns, and is at once petrified by what she sees.

They notice the look of horror on her lovely face, and instinctively guessing, also cast a glance in the direction where last the savage brute was seen.

He has continued to advance in the interim, and is now quite close, though not moving out of the straight line in the center of the street—a repulsive looking object truly, and enough to horrify the bravest.

Colonel Lionel gives a gasp. He is trembling all over, for it chances that this brave soldier, who has led forlorn hopes in the Zulu war, and performed prodigies of valor on Egyptian battle-fields, has a peculiar dread of dogs, inherited from one of his parents.

It is not the animal that has fixed Lady Ruth's attention. Just in front and directly in the line of the dog's advance is a small native child that has been playing in the street.

He cannot be over three years of age, and with his curly black head and half-naked body presents a picture of robust health.

Apparently engrossed in his play, he sees and hears nothing of the clamor around until, chancing to look up, he sees the dog, and fearlessly extends his chubby arms toward it.

The picture is one never to be forgotten.

It thrills every one who looks on.

No one seems to have a gun or weapon of any kind. A peculiar paralysis affects them, a feeling of dumb horror.

A shriek sounds; from a window is seen the form of a native woman, who wrings her hands in terrible anguish.

The child's mother! God pity her! to be an eye-witness of her darling's fate!

Lady Ruth turns to the colonel, to the man who so recently proudly declared that no English woman ever asked

a favor that a British officer would not grant, no matter what the risk.

"Save the darling!" her pallid lips utter.

He trembles all over, groans, takes a couple of tottering steps forward, and then leans against the wall for support.

"I cannot," he gasps.

Other Britons there are who would be equal to the emergency. Mortal man has never done aught in this world that Englishmen dare not imitate, and indeed they generally lead. It is unfortunate for England that an antipathy for dogs runs in the Blunt family.

This time Lady Ruth does not say "coward," but her face expresses the fine contempt she feels. With that mother's shrieks in her ears, what can she think of a man who will hesitate to save a sweet child, even at the risk of meeting the most terrible death known to the world?

She turns to face the man who a short time before positively refused to risk his life because Miss Caprice desired it.

What can she hope from him?

As she thus turns she discovers that John Craig is no longer there, though three seconds before his hand was on her arm.

A shout comes from the street, where, when last she looked, not a living thing could be seen but the advancing mad dog and the kneeling child. A shout that proceeds from a strong pair of lungs, and is intended to turn the attention of the brute toward the person emitting it. A shout that causes hope to thrill in many hearts, to inspire a confidence that the innocent may be saved.

The young doctor from Chicago is seen bounding to meet the maddened brute, now so terribly close to the child.

None knows better than John Craig what the result of a bite may be. He has seen more than one hydrophobia patient meet death in the most dreadful manner known to the profession.

Yet he faces this fate now, the man who was thought too cowardly to crawl out along that bleak rock and secure a white flower for a girl's whim.

He goes not because it will be a great thing to do, or on account of the admiration which success will bring him. That mother's shriek of agony rings in his ears, and if he even knew that he was going to his death, yet would he still assume the risk.

It was on account of a mother—his own—he refused to risk his life before, and the same sacred affection inspires his action now, for he could never look into her dear eyes again, except in a shame-faced way, if he allowed this child to meet death while he stood an inactive spectator of the tragedy.

As he advances, John draws his right arm from his coat-sleeve. It is not the act of thoughtlessness, but has been done with a motive.

When the coat is free, with a quick motion he whirls it around, so that it rolls about his left arm.

Those who see the act comprehend his purpose, and realize that he means to force the brute to seize him there.

All this has occurred in a very brief time. Perhaps a quarter of a minute has elapsed since Lady Ruth turned to Colonel Lionel, and besought his aid.

John Craig has at least accomplished one purpose. Just as the mad dog is about to snap at the child, the young medical student snatches the boy away, and throws him to the rear. The child rolls over and over, and then, sitting up, begins to cry, more from surprise at the rough treatment than because he is hurt.

There is no time for John to turn and fly, and pick up the child on the way.

The dog is upon him.

John has only a chance to drop on his knee, and thrust his left arm forward.

Those who are watching, and they are many, hold their breath in dread suspense.

"Heaven preserve him!" says Lady Ruth, wringing her clasped hands in an agony of fear.

They see the youth, he is hardly more, offer his bound arm to the beast, and those glittering fangs at once close upon it.

Then, quick as a flash, having filled the dog's jaws, John Craig throws himself forward, his whole effort being to crush the animal to the ground by his weight.

It is the work of a strategist. A veteran hunter when met by a fierce panther could not do better than this.

As John has expected, the dog, taken by surprise, does not offer the resistance that his powerful strength would warrant, but is at once borne backward, nor can he release his hold from the cloth-bound arm which his teeth have seized upon.

A struggle under such circumstances must be a terrible thing, and the shorter it can be made the better.

They see the man throw himself upon the brute; they know his other hand has sought the animal's throat, as the only means of ending his existence.

Prayers for his safety arise from many a heart, as the people watch the dreadful conflict from windows, and balconies, and other places where they have sought refuge.

The struggle is of brief duration.

John has the advantage in the contest, and the desire in his soul to prevent this mad beast from injuring others lends him a strength beyond what is naturally his portion.

With a grip of iron he clutches the brute's throat, and in a few moments the dog stiffens in death.

The young medical student arises, but the ferocious brute lies there harmless in the roadway. The smallest child in Valetta may play on the street now and fear no evil, thanks to the love one American bears for his mother.

Now that the danger is past, people flock out.

With the rest our tourists hasten toward the young hero. A form flies past them with wild eyes and disheveled hair; a form that pounces upon the little chap still crying in fright, and presses him convulsively to her breast.

That is the mother of the child.

They rush to the spot, some to congratulate the youth who slew the dog, others to gaze upon the horrible spectacle the animal presents as he lies there devoid of life.

Lady Ruth comes with the rest, and upon her fair face and in her sunny eyes can be seen a warmth of keenest admiration, such as poor Blunt failed to receive when he leaned far over the dizzy precipice to secure the flower Miss Caprice desired.

"Oh, doctor, how noble of you! I shall never forgive myself for the foolish blunder I made. See! these people look upon you as a hero, for you risked your life for a child of Malta. I am proud to be known as your friend."

Her looks as well as her words are enough to send any man into the seventh heaven of delight.

John Craig is very white; a set look is upon his face, but he smiles a little.

"I am glad the little fellow was not touched."

"And you?" she gasps, a sudden fear arising.

He slowly unwinds the coat which was thrust into the mad dog's mouth, and then rolls up his shirt-sleeve, to disclose to her horrified eyes the blue imprint of two fangs in the muscular part of his forearm.