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# **Captivating Mary Carstairs**

Henry Sydnor Harrison

# Imprint

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## NOTE

\_This book, representing the writer's first effort at a long story, has something of a story of its own. First planned in 1900 or 1901, it was begun in 1905, and finished at length, in a version, three years later. Through the two years succeeding it underwent various adventures, including, if memory serves, two complete overhauling. Having thus reached by stages something like its present form, it was, in August, 1910, favorably reported on by the publishers; but yet another rewriting preceded its final acceptance, a few weeks later. Meanwhile, I had turned to fresh work; and, as it chanced, "Queed" was both begun and finished in the interval while "Captivating Mary Carstairs" was taking her last journeys abroad. Turned away by two publishers, the newer manuscript shortly found welcome from a third. So it befell that I, as yet more experienced in rejections, suddenly found myself with two books, of widely different sorts and intentions, scheduled for publication by different publishers, almost simultaneously. As this seemed to be more books than society required from an unknown writer, it was decided to put out the present story—which is a "story," as I conceive the terms, and not a novel—over a pen name.

At that time, be it said, with an optimism that now has its humorous side, I viewed myself prospectively as a ready and fertile writer, producing a steady flow of books of very various sorts. Hence it occurred to me that a pseudonym might have a permanent serviceability. So far from these anticipations proving justified, I am now moved to abandon the pseudonym in the only instance I have had occasion to use it. Writers have sometimes been charged with seeking to capitalize their own good fortune. My motive, in authorizing the republication of this story over my name, is not that. The fact is only that experience has taught me not to like pseudonymity: my feeling being that those who take an interest in my work are entitled, if they so desire, to see it as a whole\_.

**H.S.H.**

*Charleston, West Virginia, 16 March, 1914*



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# **CAPTIVATING MARY CARSTAIRS**

Captivating Mary Carstairs



## CHAPTER I

### THE CHIEF CONSPIRATOR SECURES A PAL

In a rear room of a quaint little house uptown, a great bronzed-faced man sat at a piano, a dead pipe between his teeth, and absently played the most difficult of Beethoven's sonatas. Though he played it divinely, the three men who sat smoking and talking in a near-by corner paid not the least attention to him. The player, it seemed, did not expect them to: he paid very little attention himself.

Next to the selection of members, that is, no doubt, the most highly prized thing about the Curzon Club: you are not expected to pay attention unless you want to. It is a sanctuary where no one can bore you, except yourself. The members have been chosen with this in mind, and not chosen carelessly.

Lord Pembroke, who married a Philadelphian, is quoted as saying that the Curzon is the most democratic club in a too confoundedly democratic country. M. Arly, the editor, has told Paris that it is the most exclusive club in the world. Probably both were right. The electing board is the whole club, and a candidate is stone-dead at the first blackball; but no stigma attaches to him for that. Of course, it is a small club. Also, though money is the least of all passports there, it is a wealthy club. No stretch of the imagination could describe its dues as low. But through its sons of plutocracy, and their never-ending elation at finding themselves in, has arisen the Fund, by which poor but honest men can join, and do join, with never a thought of ways and means. Of these Herbert Horning, possibly the best-liked man in the club, who supported a large family off the funny department of a magazine, was one. He had spurned the suggestion when it was first made to him, and had reluctantly foregone his election; whereon Peter Maginnis had taken him aside, a dash of red in his ordinarily composed eye.

"How much?" he demanded brutally.

"How much for what?"

"How much for you?" roared Peter. "How much must the club pay you to get you in?"

Horning stared, pained.

"God meant no man to be a self-conscious ass," said Peter more mildly. "The club pays you a high compliment, and you have the nerve to reply that you don't take charity. I suppose if Congress voted you a medal for writing the funniest joke in America, you'd have it assayed and remit the cash. Chuck it, will you? Once in a year we find a man we want, and then we go ahead and take him. We don't think much of money here but — as I say, how much?"

The "but" implied that Horning did, and hurt as it was meant to. He came into the club, took cheerfully what they offered him that way, and felt grateful ever afterwards that Maginnis had steered him to the light.

The big man, Maginnis himself, sat on at the piano, his great fingers rambling deftly over the keys. He was playing Brahms now and doing it magnificently. He was fifteen stone, all bone and muscle, and looked thirty pounds heavier, because you imagined, mistakenly, that he carried a little fat. He was the richest man in the club, at least so far as prospects went, but he wore ready-made clothes, and one inferred, correctly, that a suit of them lasted him a long time. He looked capable of everything, but the fact was that he had done nothing. But for his money and a past consisting of thirty years of idleness, he might have been the happiest dog alive.

"The best government," said one of the three men who were not listening to the piano, "is simply the surest method for putting public opinion into power."

The sentence drifted over the player's shoulder and Brahms ended with a crash.

"Balzac said that," he cried, rising abruptly, "and said it better! But, good heavens, how you both miss the point! Why, let me tell you."

But this they stoutly declined to do. Amid laughter and protests — for the big man's hobbies were well known to the club — two

of them sprang up in mock terror, and headed for the door. They indicated that they had promised each other to play billiards and dared not break the engagement.

"I couldn't stay to the end, anyway, Peter," explained one, from the door. "My wife sits up when I'm out after midnight. Meet me here for breakfast some bank-holiday, and we'll give the day to it."

Maginnis, who never got over feeling disappointed when he saw his audience slipping away from him, sighed, searched through his frowzy pockets for a match, lit his pipe, and fell upon a lounge near to all the society that was left him.

"Why weren't you up?" said this society presently.

"The idea of dinner was repellent to me."

"To you, Peter—the famous trencherman of song and story? Why this unwonted daintiness?"

"Lassitude. Too weary to climb the stairs. Besides, I wasn't hungry."

"Ah," said Reggie Townes, "you have the caveman's idea of dinner, I see.

It strikes you as purely an occasion for purveying provender to man's interior. The social feature eludes you. You know what I think, Peter?

You ought to go to work."

"*Work!*"

"That's the word. What of it?"

"Not a thing. The idea was new to me; that's all."

"Persiflage and all that aside, why don't you take a stab at politics?"

"Politics! Here in New York! I'd sooner go into Avernus of the easy descent. If you had a town to run all by yourself now, there might be something in it. That idea of yours as to going to work, while unquestionably novel, strikes me as rather clever."

"No credit belongs to me," said Townes, "if I happened to be born brilliant instead of good-looking."

"I'll ponder it," said Peter; and stretching out his great hand with a gesture which banished the subject, he pushed a service button and begged Townes to be so kind as to name his poison.

Outside in the hall a voice just then called his name, and Maginnis answered.

A young man in evening dress strolled through the doorway, a tallish, lithe young man with a pleasant clean-cut face and very light hair. It was evident enough that he patronized a good tailor. He glanced at the two men, nodded absently, and dropped without speech into a chair near the door. Townes eyed him somewhat quizzically.

"Evening, Larry. A little introspective to-night, yes?"

Peter said: "By bull luck you have stumbled into a company of gentlemen about to place an order. Go ahead. Mention a preference."

The young man, unseeing eyes on Peter, did not answer. Instead, he sprang up, as though struck by a thought of marked interest and bolted out the door. They saw him vanish into the telephone booth across the hall and bang the glass door shut behind him.

"Forgot an engagement."

"You mean remembered one," said Peter.

"It all figures out to the same answer," said Townes; and glancing presently at his watch, he announced that he must be trotting on.

"But I've ordered something for you, man."

"Varney can use it, can't he?"

The door opened, and the tallish young man stood on the threshold again, this time social and affable. His distractness, oddly enough, had all gone. He greeted the two in the smoking-room as though he had seen them for the first time that evening; expressed his pleasure at being in their company; inquired after their healths and late pursuits; pressed cigarettes upon them.

They rallied him upon his furtive movements and fickle demeanor, but drew only badinage in kind, and no explanations; and Townes, laughing, turned to the door.

"Dally with us yet a little while, Reggie."

"No, gentles, no! I'm starting abroad to-night and have already dallied too long."

"Abroad!"

"My sister," said Townes, "as perhaps you don't know, wedded a foreigner – Willy Harcourt, born and raised in Brooklyn. Therefore, I am now leaving to go to a party in Brooklyn. Say that to yourself slowly – 'a party in Brooklyn!' Sounds sort of ominous, doesn't it? If the worst happens, I look to you fellows to break it to my mother. Please mention that I was smiling to the last."

He waved a farewell and disappeared into the hall. Varney dropped into the chair Townes had left empty, and elevated his feet to the lounge where sprawled the length of Peter Maginnis. Peter looked up and the eyes of the two men met.

"Well, Laurence? What is the proposition?" "Proposition? What do you mean?"

"An ass," replied Maginnis, pumping seltzer into a tall glass, "could see that you have something on your mind."

Varney pulled a match from the little metal box-holder, and looked at him with reluctant admiration. "Sherlock Holmes Maginnis! I *have* something on my mind. A friend dropped it there half an hour ago, and now I've come to drop it on yours." He glanced at the room's two doors and saw that both were shut. "Time is short. The outfit upstairs may drift in any minute. Listen. Do you recall telling me the other day, with tears in your eyes, that you were slowly dying for something new and interesting to do?"

Peter nodded.

"I think of your pleasure," said Varney, "always. By looking about me and keeping my eyes and ears open at all hours, I have found you just the thing."

"New and interesting?"

"There are men in this town who would run themselves to death trying to get in it on the ground floor."

Maginnis shook his head.

"I have done everything in this world," he said almost sadly, "except, I may say, the felonies."

"But this," said Varney, "is a felony."

Struck by his tone, Peter glanced up. "Mean it?"

"Sure thing."

"As I remarked before, what is the proposition?"

"To sum it all up in a word," said Varney, "there's a job of kidnapping on and I happened to get the contract. That's all there is to the little trifle."

Peter swung his feet around to the floor, and sat up. His conviction that Varney was trying to be funny died hard.

Varney laughed. "I need a pal," he added. "Five minutes ago I telephoned and got permission to offer the place to you."

"Stop being so confounded mysterious," Peter broke out, "and go ahead!"

Varney blew smoke thoughtfully and said, "I will. In fact, that's what I came for. It's a devil of a delicate little matter to talk about to anybody, as it happens. Of course, what I tell you must never go an inch further, whether you come along or not."

"Naturally."

"You know my Uncle Elbert?"

"Old Carstairs?"

Varney nodded. "He wouldn't thank you for the adjective, though. I got the contract from him. By the way, he's not my uncle, of course; he was simply a great friend of my mother's. I inherited the friendship, and in these last five years he and I have somehow managed to get mighty close together. Eight years or so ago," he continued, "as you may, or may not know, Uncle Elbert and his wife parted. There wasn't a thing the matter, I believe, except that they weren't hitting it off particularly well. They simply agreed to disa-

gree. *Nouveau riche*, and all that, wasn't it? Mrs. Carstairs has some money of her own. She picked up, packed up, walked out, bought a place up the river, near Hunston, and has lived there ever since."

Peter looked up quickly. "Hunston? Ha! But fire away."

"She and Uncle Elbert have stayed pretty good friends all through it. They exchange letters now and then, and once or twice when she has been in the city, I believe they have met—though not in recent years. My private suspicion is that she has never entirely got over being in love with him. Anyhow, there's their general relationship in a nutshell—parted but friendly. It might have stayed just like that till they were both in their graves, but for one accidental complication. There is a child."

"I seem to remember," said Peter. "A little boy."

"On the contrary. A little girl. Uncle Elbert," said Varney, "is a bit of a social butterfly. Mrs. Carstairs is an earnest domestic character. As I gather, that was what they clashed on—the idea of what a home ought to be. When the split came, Mrs. Carstairs took the child and Uncle Elbert was willing enough to have her do it. That was natural enough, Peter. He had his friends and his clubs and his little dinners, and he was no more competent to raise a girl baby than you are, which is certainly going some for a comparison. I suppose the fact was that he was glad to be free of the responsibility. But it's mighty different now."

"You see," said Varney, lighting one cigarette from another and throwing the old one away, "he must be pretty lonely all by himself in that big house of his. On top of that he's getting old and isn't in very good health. Explain it any way you like. The simple fact is that within this last year or so, it's gradually gotten to be a kind of obsession with him, an out-and-out, down-and-out monomania, to know that kid—to have her come and spend part of every year with him. That's natural, too, I should say."

"H'm. Mrs. Carstairs sticks to her like fly-paper, I suppose?"

"Not at all. She admits Uncle Elbert's rights and is entirely willing to let him have Mary—for such is our little heroine's name—for part of the time. It is the child who is doing the fly-paper business. The painful fact is that she declines to have anything whatever to do

with her father. Invitations, commands, entreaties—she spurns them all. Yes, I asked him if they had tried spanking, but he didn't answer—seemed rather miffed, in fact. The child simply will not come, and that is point number one. Now, of course, Uncle Elbert realizes that he has not been what the world would call a good father. And he has figured it out that Mary, evidently a young precocity, has judged him, found him guilty, and sentenced him to banishment from her affections. That hurts, you know. Well, he is certain that if he could once see her and be thrown with her for a few days, she would find that he is not such an old ogre, after all, would take him back as a father, as we might say, and that after that everything would be plain sailing. That's his theory. The point is how to see her and be thrown with her for the necessary few days."

"Why does n't he get on the train and go to Hunston? Or, if Mrs. Carstairs is really so decent about the thing, why doesn't she get on the train and bring Mary down here?"

"Good. I put both of those up to him, and they seemed to embarrass him a little. I gathered that he had suggested them both to Mrs. Carstairs, and that she had turned them down hard. The ground seemed delicate. You see, we must allow for the personal equation in all this. No matter where they met, he couldn't hang around the house getting acquainted with Mary without coming into sort of intimate contact with Mrs. Carstairs, and giving a kind of domestic touch to their relations. You see how that is. She wants to be fair and generous about it, but if she is in love with him, that would be a little more than flesh and blood could bear, I suppose. Then, as I say, there is the pig-headedness of the child. Anyway, Uncle Elbert assures me that both those plans are simply out of the question. So there is the situation. Mary won't come to see him by herself. Mrs. Carstairs won't bring Mary to see him, and she won't let him come to see Mary. Well, what remains?"

Peter said nothing. In a room overhead a manifestly improvised quartet struck up "Should Auld Acquaintance be Forgot?" with great enthusiasm.

"You see there is only one thing. The old gentleman," said Varney, "has brooded over the matter till it's broken him all up. He was in bed when I was there just now. He asked me to go to Hunston and