THE CAPTAIN & THE CHERUB

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AT exactly what moment the Captain discovered that the Cherub had grown up it is impossible to say; suffice it that when the knowledge did come, it came as a veritable thunder-clap.

As a matter of fact the Captain had never thought about it at all; in his slow, man-like way the idea had never entered his head. The Cherub had been the Cherub for so long that it seemed impossible she could ever become anything else.

It happened in this wise. Captain Richard Purdue, while still little more than a boy, had

held a dying comrade in his arms, on a certain dark night after a certain Moro attack, and had promised something, solemnly enough, in the light of the great stars that were winking overhead. The dying comrade—Jack Milner—was older than Richard Purdue, and was married. His wife had died and he had a child in far-off New Orleans—a girl. There was no one he could trust to look after the baby (for she was little more); and Dick Purdue promised, in the few moments that were left, that he would take the charge upon himself. A small matter, with the man's grateful eyes looking into his and with the man's last halting words thanking him. Dick Purdue was a rich man; his dying friend a poor one; it was so easy to promise to look after a baby.

So it came about that Dick Purdue looked after her for a year or two by proxy; made arrangements for governesses and what not, while he was still away from America. Then the captain stopped a Mauser bullet one day during a nasty skirmish. Months were spent in the hospital, but health would not return. The surgeons said he had been too long in the Philippine climate. So, with a long furlough, Captain Richard Purdue went back to the Louisiana he had not seen for years; and so came face to face, for the first time, with his charge. There was an old house in a New Orleans suburb, with a great garden attached to it, that belonged to him, as it had belonged to his family for generations; the child had been installed there with a governess and a species of nurse-housekeeper; there she awaited the coming of the man she had never seen.

They got on finely together from the very first. The soldier was a man of but few words, even at that age; his life in the service had been all in all to him, and whatever softness was in his nature was left for the child to draw out. That she succeeded soon became evident; the Captain devoted his life to her, and it became rather a joke among his friends that he scarcely went anywhere without her. She was his sole care. A thoughtful board had retired him for physical disability, due to the Mauser bullet. She was a wayward, winsome child, with something of the happy-go-lucky nature of the dead Jack Milner; and the Captain, proud of her childish beauty, was glad always that his name should be associated with that of the girl. They were spoken of, laughingly enough always, as the Captain and the Cherub; and while some people said that the idea was pretty, and the Captain a real good sort, there were not wanting those who shrugged their shoulders at the absurdity of a young man being burdened in that fashion—especially a young man of wealth and position who ought quite properly to marry. But those opinions troubled neither the Captain nor the Cherub; they lived their lives gloriously, in the sense that the Captain taught her to ride and to drive, gave her something of his own fine courage, and was glad in his heart always to know that she belonged to him. She was a child in his mind, and he saw nothing of the lengthening of frocks—saw no change in her from what she had been when first he had seen her in the old home. They had their world there, and that world was all in all to them and nothing outside really mattered.

The frocks had lengthened to such an extent that it became vitally necessary that the Cherub (whose real name, by the way, was Hazel) should do even as other girl's of lengthening frocks—that is, go to evening parties. The evening parties grew to dances, where one kind friend and another of the Captain's played the part of chaperone, in some pity for the motherless girl, and in some contempt for the captain, her guardian. And still the Captain kept his dream, and saw only the child who had grown up from the days of very short frocks indeed; and still he refused to consider the probability of her being a woman.

I think it was first brought home to him when one night he sat smoking into the small hours, waiting for the Cherub to return. The old house was very silent. Dick Purdue had forgotten almost how late it was. Then there came a peal at the bell, and, knowing that the servants had gone to bed, he strode into the hall to answer the summons. It was a fine moonlight night—a night for lovers—and he saw her coming through the darkened garden with some one at her side. It was a boyish voice that mingled with the girl's own tones; and suddenly it seemed to the Captain that there was a faint stirring in his breast—an impossible, ridiculous feeling of jealousy. She was a child; but someone had driven through the moonlit night with her, and was even now whispering as he brought her to the door. In brief, the Captain did not like it.

The boy was a nice boy; quite honestly in love with her, as he would in all probability be in love with a dozen girls yet, before he thought seriously of love at all; but that didn't matter to the Captain. The Captain dismissed the escort quite curtly, and closed and locked the door; then he strode back into his room, with the girl following.

And then it was that the scales seemed to fall from the eyes of Captain Richard Purdue, for he saw before him someone he did not know. The child had grown into the woman; this radiant being, who faced him with shining eyes and red lips slightly parted, was not the child who had played but yesterday, as it seemed, in the garden of the old house. Dick Purdue had been blind; the Cherub stood here to-night to accuse him dumbly enough of his blindness, and to remind him of his responsibility.

He came across to where she stood, and greeted her a little shyly. "Why, Cherub—we're growing up," he said, with perhaps a little sigh for the years that were gone, and another for the years that were to come. "'Pon my word, I hadn't noticed it."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, dropping him a mock curtsey. "But other people have noticed it."

"I suppose they have, Cherub," said Dick. "Yet it seems only yesterday that you and I met, and shook hands—"

"You kissed me," she broke in.

"Of course I kissed you; what does a guardian generally do?" he responded. "I've let the years slip by, Cherub, and haven't quite understood all that has been happening. Now I shall have to remember who you are, and pay you proper respect, I suppose."

She came across to him, slipped her hand in his arm, and laid her face against his shoulder; for the Captain was uncommon tall. "Don't let the years matter," she whispered, "I'm only the little girl you've taken care of so long; I can never be grown up with you. I've had a lovely time— the best that ever a girl had in all the world; and I owe it all to you."

"We mustn't get sentimental, Cherub," said the Captain, pinching her cheek. "We've been good comrades always—good pals, you know; and 'pal' is a very good word. I don't want to get sentimental, either; but you've done such a lot for me, Cherub; you've made me live for something and someone other than myself. Shake hands on it—and go to bed, Cherub."

At that new note in his voice she shook hands with him; there was not the usual rapturous hug she gave him always when they parted for the night. He wondered a little as she went out, and did not understand, in fact, why her feet lagged on the stairs as she went to her room. He smoked another cigar, the better to think over the matter in his stolid fashion; he told himself, as he threw the stump of it into the fireplace, that he had got to be mighty careful of the little girl, and that it was a pity there wasn't a woman to look after her. Above all—why the devil had that boy come laughing and chattering with her up to the house that night?

It was with the coming of Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin that events began to develop more rapidly. Exactly where Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin came from the Captain never quite understood; suffice it that she was a widow, and young, and that the late Mr. Fisher-Gilpin was never referred to, but remained always, indeed, something of a mystery. Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin had taken deep interest in the girl and in the remarkable romance which seemed to center in her and in the Captain; moreover, she openly referred to the Captain as "a dear" for having done so wonderful a thing as to look after the Cherub all these years. The innocent Dick Purdue, knowing nothing of women, found himself descended upon and taken charge of; he was at first rather glad to find that any woman had taken pity on his little girl, and was generally looking after her. Be it said with no uncharitableness that Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin had eyes for the Captain, and for the Captain's wealth, and thought she saw here an easy game to play.

If the Captain grew at all uneasy about the Cherub it was when his own quiet life began to stir. He thought that the girl was going out a little too much and too often; moreover, she talked to people of whom the Captain knew nothing. Dick Purdue did not care much about dancing, and so he seldom went out, despite the many invitations he had on the girl's account; but then Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin was with her, and so all was well.

But there came a day when a man the Captain knew but slightly addressed him in the club upon the subject of the Cherub. It was an amazing thing, because it happened that the man was one Dick Purdue did not like—a man of whom sinister things were said. He was a certain Talbot Rawlings—a loud, bullying, swaggering fellow; despite his name a member of the old French crowd which boasts of feminine conquest and still offers to fight duels. He addressed the Captain in a tone that was particularly aggressive and objectionable.

"I say, Purdue—that's an awfully jolly little girl of yours."

The Captain got to his feet, and the Captain stiffened. "To whom do you refer, sir?" he asked, quietly.

"Why, to your ward—if that's what she is," said the other. "Met her the other night at a dance. No offence, you know."

"I did not know that Miss Milner had the honor of your acquaintance," said the Captain, and turned on his heel and walked away.

Captain Richard Purdue decided that he should be glad when the summer heat would drive them away from parties. Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin had a house at a charming place called Tanner's Corner—"where one could bury one's self, you know"—and there was another house to be let there also. Why should not the Captain take it and they could have a jolly summer together. The matter being placed before the Cherub, that young lady (grown a little white-faced and tired-looking) said that it would be delightful; and so the bargain was struck and a general exodus made to Tanner's Corner. The Captain, innocently enough, saw before him a prospect of quiet sunlit days and scampers on horseback with the Cherub across country—a sort of early to bed and early to rise business.

But in that he had not reckoned with Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin. Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin's house was a large one, and it was filled with a succession of guests, for ever coming and going. The days were filled with picnics and excursions of one sort and another; sometimes even in this quiet country place a little dance would be given that took them well into the small hours. There were card parties—in fact, the Captain came to the conclusion that it was simply the old hurry-scurry life removed from New Orleans into the country. And the Captain, seeing the somewhat jaded look on the face of the Cherub, decided that he did not like it, and wondered what he could do. Of course, Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin ought to know best what suited the girl; and it was nice for the Cherub to have so many friends, but it was not quite what the Captain had planned.

The game went on merrily enough, so far as Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin was concerned; and in a sense the Captain was dragged out of his seclusion and was forced willy-nilly to join more than one party. The story of his adoption of the Cherub had travelled down to Tanner's Corner, and he was regarded with some amusement by the gay visitors who came to Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin's house. There were whispers behind the girl's back which she did not understand; but Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin always discreetly checked those whispers when she could, and was apparently the soul of good-nature and kindliness. The Cherub, for her part, had altered strangely, in the sense, that is, that the old fine comradeship between the Captain and herself was gone; this was indeed, he told himself, a woman with whom he had to deal, and a wilful woman at that.

It happened one day that the Captain was called to the city on a matter of business. He was to return late that night, and he was anxious to know what the Cherub would do while he was away. That little chill note of misunderstanding that had crept in between them was sounded when he started for the station and it sent the Captain to town vaguely uneasy.

"What are you going to do to-day, Cherub?" he asked, as they stood together on the platform; he had an uneasy sense that she was looking away from him, almost as if impatient that he should be gone.

"Oh—there's a picnic," she said. "We shan't be back till quite late."

"Then I suppose you won't be able to meet me at the station?" he asked.

"Yes—I'll meet you, if you wish me to," she answered, still without looking at him. "I can arrange to get back earlier."

"Not for the world," he replied, a little stiffly, and at that moment the train came in. As it steamed out of the station he glanced from the window and saw her still standing on the platform, a slim, girlish figure in her white frock, waving her hand to him.

The Captain lunched at his club, and transacted his business, then caught the last train back to Tanner's Corner by the mere skin of his teeth. He wondered a little if by any chance the girl might be waiting on the platform; he longed a little that she might have remembered him and contrived to get back in time. But she was not there when he arrived; and he walked somewhat desolately out of the station, and down the long dusty road that led to his house.

FOUND HIMSELF LYING ON THE GRAVEL PATH

It was growing dark, and the Captain had the road to himself. Striding along, more angry with himself than with her, he presently became aware of two figures walking slowly along before him, in the distance; and one of those figures he recognized. It was the Cherub, sauntering along beside a man who was bending over her and talking to her earnestly.

Captain Richard Purdue was no spy, although he felt a sudden tightening at his heart; he turned about in his tracks, and took another road that should bring him home. Coming to the house itself, he found that she was not there, and so, in the most natural manner, went out to meet her and her companion. They were entering the gate from the road as he came towards it and the man who was with the Cherub stopped and raised his hat on seeing him. The man was Talbot Rawlings.

For a moment Dick Purdue and Rawlings looked into each other's eye; there was an awkward pause, and the girl, with a quick word of farewell, entered the house. Mr. Rawlings fidgetted a little, and finally swinging his cane, turned to go.

"Good night, Purdue," he said. "I thought I'd see the little girl home."

"Stop!" said the Captain, suddenly, and the other man wheeled about and faced him. "I should like you to know, Mr. Rawlings, that I don't care for Miss Milner to be seen about with you; you're not the type of man with whom I care for her to associate. I hope I make myself quite clear."

"What's it got to do with you?" demanded the other, in a low voice. "Do you think you're going to keep the girl to yourself always?"

"It doesn't concern you what I think," said the Captain. "Only I won't have her seen about with you. Now you can go."

Talbot Rawlings stopped for a moment, looking at the other furtively and evidently striving to make up his mind to retort, thought better of it, and with a shrug and a laugh turned on his heel, and walked away, whistling a tune. The Captain went back into the house, mentally deciding that he would say nothing about the matter to the Cherub.

But in that he was wrong; for the Cherub rather badly wanted to talk to a friend just then. Almost it seemed that the Captain had been drifting away from her; almost it seemed that the old friendly feeling was gone. She was young and high-spirited, and she knew that in reality she was not in fault; she chafed at the thought that the Captain should not understand her, and should by his very looks appear to be misjudging her. She shook hands with him when she went to bed; then stopped for a moment at the door, looking back at him.

"What's the matter?" he asked, in his quiet level voice.

"Nothing. Good-night!" With a swish of skirts she was gone, and the captain had lost his opportunity.

It turned out, of course, that Talbot Rawlings was staying at the house of Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin; so that it became difficult for the Captain not to meet him. Moreover, it became evident that Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin, in the carrying out of that scheme to which she had set her mind, had determined that Talbot Rawlings should see as much of the girl as possible, the better to draw her away from the Captain. After all it was not easy for the Captain to see that what he had demanded should be carried out; he could not openly insist that Rawlings should keep away from the girl. So, as the breach between the Captain and the Cherub widened, for no real reason, the girl seemed to turn more and more to this man of the shady reputation.

The crisis came at a dinner party given at the house of Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin, to which the Captain and the Cherub were invited. It seemed that night, as the two of them walked down through the quiet village to the house, that the girl wanted to speak to this man stalking along beside her; more than once she looked at him wistfully.

After the dinner, the night being fine and hot, the guests were strolling about in the grounds, and the Captain was with Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin. They could hear voices floating to them, and could see moving figures here and there among the trees; suddenly, rounding a corner, they heard a quick scuffle, and the protesting tones of a girl's voice, and there was Talbot Rawlings holding the Cherub by the waist, and struggling with her. The Cherub broke away from him as the others appeared, and for a moment covered her face with her hands; but that moment was enough for the Captain. Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin, obviously very annoyed, put her arm about the girl and drew her away; the Captain faced the other man.

"Any explanation?" he demanded.

"None—to you," retorted the other. "Mind your own business."

Then and there the Captain took him in his stern grasp and beat him as a man beats a dog that has done wrong—not in sheer passion, but because the beating is necessary. Rawlings struggled, and tried to hit back, but presently found himself lying on the gravel path, with an arm across his eyes, muttering confused curses.

"I can't fight—not in your way," he said at last, getting to his knees and then to his feet—"but I can shoot."

"I'll meet you when and where you like," said the Captain, bitterly. "I'm a little old-fashioned in these matters. But we can get the matter over, and take our chances afterwards—that is, the survivor can take his chance. There are plenty of woods and fields about here; let it be in the early morning."

So the other man made the appointment, and went off to his room to repair damages. The Captain, meeting Mrs. Fisher-Gilpin, asked quietly that the Cherub might go home with him, and declined to answer any questions. And in silence the Captain and the Cherub walked home together.

The dawn was growing in the sky when the Captain sat down, with all his old calmness restored, to write a final letter to his lawyer—a letter which should mean that the Cherub was for ever provided for, in case of any accident happening to himself; he wanted that to be quite clear. Then he took from a drawer a case containing a pair of delicately-made little revolvers and examined them to be certain that they were in proper order. There was time yet before he had to meet his man; Captain Richard Purdue told himself that in this he was acting as any dead and gone Purdue of the past would have done in such a matter.

"WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?"

There was a step upon the stairs. The Captain closed the case quickly, and thrust the letter out of sight. He wondered who could be stirring at such an hour. Then as he watched the door he saw it slowly open; in a moment the Chernb was in the room. She had a dressing gown wrapped about her, and her hair hung over her shoulders, as it had done ever so long before when she had been a child.

"What's the matter, Cherub?" asked the Captain, standing up grim and erect before her.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. "I was afraid. What are you going to do?"

"Nothing that concerns you," he said, not unkindly. "I've business on hand."

"You're all in black," she said, looking at him steadily—"what are you going to do?"

"Well, you see, Cherub," he answered, "in the old days, when a man insulted a woman, some other man had to go out and do his level best to wipe him off the earth, because he wasn't quite the right sort of man to be on it. Times have changed—but not, I think, in that matter. Also it's necessary to be in black, so that the other man may not have anything to fire at—no particular target, I mean. Now, go back to bed, Cherub; I hope to be in for breakfast."

"You shan't do it," she exclaimed, suddenly, putting her arms round him, and raising her face to his. "It's all been a misunderstanding from the first, and it was only last night that I found out what a brute he is. You shan't go and fight him; you're a soldier and a gentleman, and you mustn't stand up to be shot at by such a thing as that. I've lain awake thinking about you—remembering all the days when we have been together—and when we understood one another. I was so near to your heart then, Dick"—(it was the old affectionate name she had daringly called him as a child)—"let me be near your heart again."

"You're such a child, Cherub, and some day you'll love someone very dearly," he reminded her.

"I shall never love anyone as I love you," she whispered. "There's no one in the world like you—only you've seemed so far away lately."

"But I must go and fight this man; he'll say frightful things about me if I don't," he urged.

"He'll say frightful things anyway; he's that sort of man," she replied. "Won't you let me tell you what to do?"

"Anything, Cherub, anything in the world," he whispered, holding her close.

"Take me away—just as soon as we can get away together; let us leave all these people behind; let us forget them. What does it matter what they think, if only I understand?"

But it was the Captain as well as the Cherub who understood, when, for the first time since she had grown a woman, their lips met.