

A Damsel in Distress

By

P.G. Wodehouse

CHAPTER 1.

Inasmuch as the scene of this story is that historic pile, Belpher Castle, in the county of Hampshire, it would be an agreeable task to open it with a leisurely description of the place, followed by some notes on the history of the Earls of Marshmoreton, who have owned it since the fifteenth century. Unfortunately, in these days of rush and hurry, a novelist works at a disadvantage. He must leap into the middle of his tale with as little delay as he would employ in boarding a moving tramcar. He must get off the mark with the smooth swiftness of a jack-rabbit surprised while lunching. Otherwise, people throw him aside and go out to picture palaces.

I may briefly remark that the present Lord Marshmoreton is a widower of some forty-eight years: that he has two children--a son, Percy Wilbraham Marsh, Lord Belpher, who is on the brink of his twenty-first birthday, and a daughter, Lady Patricia Maud Marsh, who is just twenty: that the chatelaine of the castle is Lady Caroline Byng, Lord Marshmoreton's sister, who married the very wealthy colliery owner, Clifford Byng, a few years before his death (which unkind people say she hastened): and that she has a step-son, Reginald. Give me time to mention these few facts and I am done. On the glorious past of the Marshmoretons I will not even touch.

Luckily, the loss to literature is not irreparable. Lord

Marshmoreton himself is engaged upon a history of the family, which will doubtless be on every bookshelf as soon as his lordship gets it finished. And, as for the castle and its surroundings, including the model dairy and the amber drawing-room, you may see them for yourself any Thursday, when Belper is thrown open to the public on payment of a fee of one shilling a head. The money is collected by Keggs the butler, and goes to a worthy local charity. At least, that is the idea. But the voice of calumny is never silent, and there exists a school of thought, headed by Albert, the page-boy, which holds that Keggs sticks to these shillings like glue, and adds them to his already considerable savings in the Farmers' and Merchants' Bank, on the left side of the High Street in Belper village, next door to the Oddfellows' Hall.

With regard to this, one can only say that Keggs looks far too much like a particularly saintly bishop to indulge in any such practices. On the other hand, Albert knows Keggs. We must leave the matter open.

Of course, appearances are deceptive. Anyone, for instance, who had been standing outside the front entrance of the castle at eleven o'clock on a certain June morning might easily have made a mistake. Such a person would probably have jumped to the conclusion that the middle-aged lady of a determined cast of countenance who was standing near the rose-garden, talking to the gardener and watching the young couple strolling on the terrace below, was the mother of

the pretty girl, and that she was smiling because the latter had recently become engaged to the tall, pleasant-faced youth at her side.

Sherlock Holmes himself might have been misled. One can hear him explaining the thing to Watson in one of those lightning flashes of inductive reasoning of his. "It is the only explanation, my dear Watson. If the lady were merely complimenting the gardener on his rose-garden, and if her smile were merely caused by the excellent appearance of that rose-garden, there would be an answering smile on the face of the gardener. But, as you see, he looks morose and gloomy."

As a matter of fact, the gardener--that is to say, the stocky, brown-faced man in shirt sleeves and corduroy trousers who was frowning into a can of whale-oil solution--was the Earl of Marshmoreton, and there were two reasons for his gloom. He hated to be interrupted while working, and, furthermore, Lady Caroline Byng always got on his nerves, and never more so than when, as now, she speculated on the possibility of a romance between her step-son Reggie and his lordship's daughter Maud.

Only his intimates would have recognized in this curious corduroy-trousered figure the seventh Earl of Marshmoreton. The Lord Marshmoreton who made intermittent appearances in London, who lunched among bishops at the Athenaeum Club without exciting

remark, was a correctly dressed gentleman whom no one would have suspected of covering his sturdy legs in anything but the finest cloth. But if you will glance at your copy of Who's Who, and turn up the "M's", you will find in the space allotted to the Earl the words "Hobby--Gardening". To which, in a burst of modest pride, his lordship has added "Awarded first prize for Hybrid Teas, Temple Flower Show, 1911". The words tell their own story.

Lord Marshmoreton was the most enthusiastic amateur gardener in a land of enthusiastic amateur gardeners. He lived for his garden. The love which other men expend on their nearest and dearest Lord Marshmoreton lavished on seeds, roses and loamy soil. The hatred which some of his order feel for Socialists and Demagogues Lord Marshmoreton kept for roseslugs, rose-beetles and the small, yellowish-white insect which is so depraved and sinister a character that it goes through life with an alias--being sometimes called a rose-hopper and sometimes a thrips. A simple soul, Lord Marshmoreton--mild and pleasant. Yet put him among the thrips, and he became a dealer-out of death and slaughter, a destroyer in the class of Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan. Thrips feed on the underside of rose leaves, sucking their juice and causing them to turn yellow; and Lord Marshmoreton's views on these things were so rigid that he would have poured whale-oil solution on his grandmother if he had found her on the underside of one of his rose leaves sucking its juice.

The only time in the day when he ceased to be the horny-handed toiler and became the aristocrat was in the evening after dinner, when, egged on by Lady Caroline, who gave him no rest in the matter--he would retire to his private study and work on his History of the Family, assisted by his able secretary, Alice Faraday. His progress on that massive work was, however, slow. Ten hours in the open air made a man drowsy, and too often Lord Marshmoreton would fall asleep in mid-sentence to the annoyance of Miss Faraday, who was a conscientious girl and liked to earn her salary.

The couple on the terrace had turned. Reggie Byng's face, as he bent over Maud, was earnest and animated, and even from a distance it was possible to see how the girl's eyes lit up at what he was saying. She was hanging on his words. Lady Caroline's smile became more and more benevolent.

"They make a charming pair," she murmured. "I wonder what dear Reggie is saying. Perhaps at this very moment--"

She broke off with a sigh of content. She had had her troubles over this affair. Dear Reggie, usually so plastic in her hands, had displayed an unaccountable reluctance to offer his agreeable self to Maud--in spite of the fact that never, not even on the public platform which she adorned so well, had his step-mother reasoned more clearly than she did when pointing out to him the advantages

of the match. It was not that Reggie disliked Maud. He admitted that she was a "topper", on several occasions going so far as to describe her as "absolutely priceless". But he seemed reluctant to ask her to marry him. How could Lady Caroline know that Reggie's entire world--or such of it as was not occupied by racing cars and golf--was filled by Alice Faraday? Reggie had never told her. He had not even told Miss Faraday.

"Perhaps at this very moment," went on Lady Caroline, "the dear boy is proposing to her."

Lord Marshmoreton grunted, and continued to peer with a questioning eye in the awesome brew which he had prepared for the thrips.

"One thing is very satisfactory," said Lady Caroline. "I mean that Maud seems entirely to have got over that ridiculous infatuation of hers for that man she met in Wales last summer. She could not be so cheerful if she were still brooding on that. I hope you will admit now, John, that I was right in keeping her practically a prisoner here and never allowing her a chance of meeting the man again either by accident or design. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder. Stuff! A girl of Maud's age falls in and out of love half a dozen times a year. I feel sure she has almost forgotten the man by now."

"Eh?" said Lord Marshmoreton. His mind had been far away, dealing

with green flies.

"I was speaking about that man Maud met when she was staying with Brenda in Wales."

"Oh, yes!"

"Oh, yes!" echoed Lady Caroline, annoyed. "Is that the only comment you can find to make? Your only daughter becomes infatuated with a perfect stranger--a man we have never seen--of whom we know nothing, not even his name--nothing except that he is an American and hasn't a penny--Maud admitted that. And all you say is 'Oh, yes!'"

"But it's all over now, isn't it? I understood the dashed affair was all over."

"We hope so. But I should feel safer if Maud were engaged to Reggie. I do think you might take the trouble to speak to Maud."

"Speak to her? I do speak to her." Lord Marshmoreton's brain moved slowly when he was pre-occupied with his roses. "We're on excellent terms."

Lady Caroline frowned impatiently. Hers was an alert, vigorous mind, bright and strong like a steel trap, and her brother's vagueness and growing habit of inattention irritated her.

"I mean to speak to her about becoming engaged to Reggie. You are her father. Surely you can at least try to persuade her."

"Can't coerce a girl."

"I never suggested that you should coerce her, as you put it. I merely meant that you could point out to her, as a father, where her duty and happiness lie."

"Drink this!" cried his lordship with sudden fury, spraying his can over the nearest bush, and addressing his remark to the invisible thrips. He had forgotten Lady Caroline completely. "Don't stint yourselves! There's lots more!"

A girl came down the steps of the castle and made her way towards them. She was a good-looking girl, with an air of quiet efficiency about her. Her eyes were grey and whimsical. Her head was uncovered, and the breeze stirred her dark hair. She made a graceful picture in the morning sunshine, and Reggie Byng, sighting her from the terrace, wobbled in his tracks, turned pink, and lost the thread of his remarks.

The sudden appearance of Alice Faraday always affected him like that.

"I have copied out the notes you made last night, Lord Marshmoreton. I typed two copies."

Alice Faraday spoke in a quiet, respectful, yet subtly authoritative voice. She was a girl of great character. Previous employers of her services as secretary had found her a jewel. To Lord Marshmoreton she was rapidly becoming a perfect incubus. Their views on the relative importance of gardening and family histories did not coincide. To him the history of the Marshmoreton family was the occupation of the idle hour: she seemed to think that he ought to regard it as a life-work. She was always coming and digging him out of the garden and dragging him back to what should have been a purely after-dinner task. It was Lord Marshmoreton's habit, when he awoke after one of his naps too late to resume work, to throw out some vague promise of "attending to it tomorrow"; but, he reflected bitterly, the girl ought to have tact and sense to understand that this was only polite persiflage, and not to be taken literally.

"They are very rough," continued Alice, addressing her conversation to the seat of his lordship's corduroy trousers. Lord Marshmoreton always assumed a stooping attitude when he saw Miss Faraday approaching with papers in her hand; for he laboured under a pathetic delusion, of which no amount of failures could rid him, that if she did not see his face she would withdraw. "You remember last night you promised you would attend to them this morning." She

paused long enough to receive a non-committal grunt by way of answer. "Of course, if you're busy--" she said placidly, with a half-glance at Lady Caroline. That masterful woman could always be counted on as an ally in these little encounters.

"Nothing of the kind!" said Lady Caroline crisply. She was still ruffled by the lack of attention which her recent utterances had received, and welcomed the chance of administering discipline. "Get up at once, John, and go in and work."

"I am working," pleaded Lord Marshmoreton.

Despite his forty-eight years his sister Caroline still had the power at times to make him feel like a small boy. She had been a great martinet in the days of their mutual nursery.

"The Family History is more important than grubbing about in the dirt. I cannot understand why you do not leave this sort of thing to MacPherson. Why you should pay him liberal wages and then do his work for him, I cannot see. You know the publishers are waiting for the History. Go and attend to these notes at once."

"You promised you would attend to them this morning, Lord Marshmoreton," said Alice invitingly.

Lord Marshmoreton clung to his can of whale-oil solution with the

clutch of a drowning man. None knew better than he that these interviews, especially when Caroline was present to lend the weight of her dominating personality, always ended in the same way.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he said. "Tonight, perhaps. After dinner, eh? Yes, after dinner. That will be capital."

"I think you ought to attend to them this morning," said Alice, gently persistent. It really perturbed this girl to feel that she was not doing work enough to merit her generous salary. And on the subject of the history of the Marshmoreton family she was an enthusiast. It had a glamour for her.

Lord Marshmoreton's fingers relaxed their hold. Throughout the rose-garden hundreds of spared thrips went on with their morning meal, unwitting of doom averted.

"Oh, all right, all right, all right! Come into the library."

"Very well, Lord Marshmoreton." Miss Faraday turned to Lady Caroline. "I have been looking up the trains, Lady Caroline. The best is the twelve-fifteen. It has a dining-car, and stops at Belpher if signalled."

"Are you going away, Caroline?" inquired Lord Marshmoreton hopefully.

"I am giving a short talk to the Social Progress League at Lewisham. I shall return tomorrow."

"Oh!" said Marshmoreton, hope fading from his voice.

"Thank you, Miss Faraday," said Lady Caroline. "The twelve-fifteen."

"The motor will be round at a quarter to twelve."

"Thank you. Oh, by the way, Miss Faraday, will you call to Reggie as you pass, and tell him I wish to speak to him."

Maud had left Reggie by the time Alice Faraday reached him, and that ardent youth was sitting on a stone seat, smoking a cigarette and entertaining himself with meditations in which thoughts of Alice competed for precedence with graver reflections connected with the subject of the correct stance for his approach-shots.

Reggie's was a troubled spirit these days. He was in love, and he had developed a bad slice with his mid-iron. He was practically a soul in torment.

"Lady Caroline asked me to tell you that she wishes to speak to you, Mr. Byng."

Reggie leaped from his seat.

"Hullo-ullo-ullo! There you are! I mean to say, what?"

He was conscious, as was his custom in her presence, of a warm, prickly sensation in the small of the back. Some kind of elephantiasis seemed to have attacked his hands and feet, swelling them to enormous proportions. He wished profoundly that he could get rid of his habit of yelping with nervous laughter whenever he encountered the girl of his dreams. It was calculated to give her a wrong impression of a chap--make her think him a fearful chump and what not!

"Lady Caroline is leaving by the twelve-fifteen."

"That's good! What I mean to say is--oh, she is, is she? I see what you mean." The absolute necessity of saying something at least moderately coherent gripped him. He rallied his forces. "You wouldn't care to come for a stroll, after I've seen the mater, or a row on the lake, or any rot like that, would you?"

"Thank you very much, but I must go in and help Lord Marshmoreton with his book."

"What a rotten--I mean, what a dam' shame!"

The pity of it tore at Reggie's heart strings. He burned with

generous wrath against Lord Marshmoreton, that modern Simon Legree, who used his capitalistic power to make a slave of this girl and keep her toiling indoors when all the world was sunshine.

"Shall I go and ask him if you can't put it off till after dinner?"

"Oh, no, thanks very much. I'm sure Lord Marshmoreton wouldn't dream of it."

She passed on with a pleasant smile. When he had recovered from the effect of this Reggie proceeded slowly to the upper level to meet his step-mother.

"Hullo, mater. Pretty fit and so forth? What did you want to see me about?"

"Well, Reggie, what is the news?"

"Eh? What? News? Didn't you get hold of a paper at breakfast?"

Nothing much in it. Tam Duggan beat Alec Fraser three up and two to play at Prestwick. I didn't notice anything else much. There's a new musical comedy at the Regal. Opened last night, and seems to be just like mother makes. The Morning Post gave it a topping notice. I must trickle up to town and see it some time this week."

Lady Caroline frowned. This slowness in the uptake, coming so soon

after her brother's inattention, displeased her.

"No, no, no. I mean you and Maud have been talking to each other for quite a long time, and she seemed very interested in what you were saying. I hoped you might have some good news for me."

Reggie's face brightened. He caught her drift.

"Oh, ah, yes, I see what you mean. No, there wasn't anything of that sort or shape or order."

"What were you saying to her, then, that interested her so much?"

"I was explaining how I landed dead on the pin with my spoon out of a sand-trap at the eleventh hole yesterday. It certainly was a pretty ripe shot, considering. I'd sliced into this baby bunker, don't you know; I simply can't keep 'em straight with the iron nowadays--and there the pill was, grinning up at me from the sand. Of course, strictly speaking, I ought to have used a niblick, but--"

"Do you mean to say, Reggie, that, with such an excellent opportunity, you did not ask Maud to marry you?"

"I see what you mean. Well, as a matter of absolute fact, I, as it were, didn't."

Lady Caroline uttered a wordless sound.

"By the way, mater," said Reggie, "I forgot to tell you about that. It's all off."

"What!"

"Absolutely. You see, it appears there's a chappie unknown for whom Maud has an absolute pash. It seems she met this sportsman up in Wales last summer. She was caught in the rain, and he happened to be passing and rallied round with his rain-coat, and one thing led to another. Always raining in Wales, what! Good fishing, though, here and there. Well, what I mean is, this cove was so deucedly civil, and all that, that now she won't look at anybody else. He's the blue-eyed boy, and everybody else is an also-ran, with about as much chance as a blind man with one arm trying to get out of a bunker with a tooth-pick."

"What perfect nonsense! I know all about that affair. It was just a passing fancy that never meant anything. Maud has got over that long ago."

"She didn't seem to think so."

"Now, Reggie," said Lady Caroline tensely, "please listen to me. You know that the castle will be full of people in a day or two for

Percy's coming-of-age, and this next few days may be your last chance of having a real, long, private talk with Maud. I shall be seriously annoyed if you neglect this opportunity. There is no excuse for the way you are behaving. Maud is a charming girl--"

"Oh, absolutely! One of the best."

"Very well, then!"

"But, mater, what I mean to say is--"

"I don't want any more temporizing, Reggie!"

"No, no! Absolutely not!" said Reggie dutifully, wishing he knew what the word meant, and wishing also that life had not become so frightfully complex.

"Now, this afternoon, why should you not take Maud for a long ride in your car?"

Reggie grew more cheerful. At least he had an answer for that.

"Can't be done, I'm afraid. I've got to motor into town to meet Percy. He's arriving from Oxford this morning. I promised to meet him in town and tool him back in the car."

"I see. Well, then, why couldn't you--?"

"I say, mater, dear old soul," said Reggie hastily, "I think you'd better tear yourself away and what not. If you're catching the twelve-fifteen, you ought to be staggering round to see you haven't forgotten anything. There's the car coming round now."

"I wish now I had decided to go by a later train."

"No, no, mustn't miss the twelve-fifteen. Good, fruity train. Everybody speaks well of it. Well, see you anon, mater. I think you'd better run like a hare."

"You will remember what I said?"

"Oh, absolutely!"

"Good-bye, then. I shall be back tomorrow."

Reggie returned slowly to his stone seat. He breathed a little heavily as he felt for his cigarette case. He felt like a hunted fawn.

Maud came out of the house as the car disappeared down the long avenue of elms. She crossed the terrace to where Reggie sat brooding on life and its problem.

"Reggie!"

Reggie turned.

"Hullo, Maud, dear old thing. Take a seat."

Maud sat down beside him. There was a flush on her pretty face, and when she spoke her voice quivered with suppressed excitement.

"Reggie," she said, laying a small hand on his arm. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Reggie patted her back paternally. There were few people he liked better than Maud.

"Always have been since the dear old days of childhood, what!"

"I can trust you, can't I?"

"Absolutely!"

"There's something I want you to do for me, Reggie. You'll have to keep it a dead secret of course."

"The strong, silent man. That's me. What is it?"

"You're driving into town in your car this afternoon, aren't you, to meet Percy?"

"That was the idea."

"Could you go this morning instead--and take me?"

"Of course."

Maud shook her head.

"You don't know what you are letting yourself in for, Reggie, or I'm sure you wouldn't agree so lightly. I'm not allowed to leave the castle, you know, because of what I was telling you about."

"The chappie?"

"Yes. So there would be terrible scenes if anybody found out."

"Never mind, dear old soul. I'll risk it. None shall learn your secret from these lips."

"You're a darling, Reggie."

"But what's the idea? Why do you want to go today particularly?"

Maud looked over her shoulder.

"Because--" She lowered her voice, though there was no one near.

"Because he is back in London! He's a sort of secretary, you know, Reggie, to his uncle, and I saw in the paper this morning that the uncle returned yesterday after a long voyage in his yacht. So--he must have come back, too. He has to go everywhere his uncle goes."

"And everywhere the uncle went, the chappie was sure to go!" murmured Reggie. "Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt."

"I must see him. I haven't seen him since last summer--nearly a whole year! And he hasn't written to me, and I haven't dared to write to him, for fear of the letter going wrong. So, you see, I must go. Today's my only chance. Aunt Caroline has gone away. Father will be busy in the garden, and won't notice whether I'm here or not. And, besides, tomorrow it will be too late, because Percy will be here. He was more furious about the thing than anyone."

"Rather the proud aristocrat, Percy," agreed Reggie. "I understand absolutely. Tell me just what you want me to do."

"I want you to pick me up in the car about half a mile down the road. You can drop me somewhere in Piccadilly. That will be near

enough to where I want to go. But the most important thing is about Percy. You must persuade him to stay and dine in town and come back here after dinner. Then I shall be able to get back by an afternoon train, and no one will know I've been gone."

"That's simple enough, what? Consider it done. When do you want to start?"

"At once."

"I'll toddle round to the garage and fetch the car." Reggie chuckled amusedly. "Rum thing! The mater's just been telling me I ought to take you for a drive."

"You are a darling, Reggie, really!"

Reggie gave her back another paternal pat.

"I know what it means to be in love, dear old soul. I say, Maud, old thing, do you find love puts you off your stroke? What I mean is, does it make you slice your approach-shots?"

Maud laughed.

"No. It hasn't had any effect on my game so far. I went round in eighty-six the other day."

Reggie sighed enviously.

"Women are wonderful!" he said. "Well, I'll be legging it and fetching the car. When you're ready, stroll along down the road and wait for me."

* * *

When he had gone Maud pulled a small newspaper clipping from her pocket. She had extracted it from yesterday's copy of the Morning Post's society column. It contained only a few words:

"Mr. Wilbur Raymond has returned to his residence at No. 11a Belgrave Square from a prolonged voyage in his yacht, the Siren."

Maud did not know Mr. Wilbur Raymond, and yet that paragraph had sent the blood tingling through every vein in her body. For as she had indicated to Reggie, when the Wilbur Raymonds of this world return to their town residences, they bring with them their nephew and secretary, Geoffrey Raymond. And Geoffrey Raymond was the man Maud had loved ever since the day when she had met him in Wales.