

CHAPTER 2.

The sun that had shone so brightly on Belfer Castle at noon, when Maud and Reggie Byng set out on their journey, shone on the West-End of London with equal pleasantness at two o'clock. In Little Gooch Street all the children of all the small shopkeepers who support life in that backwater by selling each other vegetables and singing canaries were out and about playing curious games of their own invention. Cats washed themselves on doorsteps, preparatory to looking in for lunch at one of the numerous garbage cans which dotted the sidewalk. Waiters peered austere from the windows of the two Italian restaurants which carry on the Lucretia Borgia tradition by means of one shilling and sixpenny table d'hôte luncheons. The proprietor of the grocery store on the corner was bidding a silent farewell to a tomato which even he, though a dauntless optimist, had been compelled to recognize as having outlived its utility. On all these things the sun shone with a genial smile. Round the corner, in Shaftesbury Avenue, an east wind was doing its best to pierce the hardened hides of the citizenry; but it did not penetrate into Little Gooch Street, which, facing south and being narrow and sheltered, was enabled practically to bask.

Mac, the stout guardian of the stage door of the Regal Theatre, whose gilded front entrance is on the Avenue, emerged from the

little glass case in which the management kept him, and came out to observe life and its phenomena with an indulgent eye. Mac was feeling happy this morning. His job was a permanent one, not influenced by the success or failure of the productions which followed one another at the theatre throughout the year; but he felt, nevertheless, a sort of proprietary interest in these ventures, and was pleased when they secured the approval of the public. Last night's opening, a musical piece by an American author and composer, had undoubtedly made a big hit, and Mac was glad, because he liked what he had seen of the company, and, in the brief time in which he had known him, had come to entertain a warm regard for George Bevan, the composer, who had travelled over from New York to help with the London production.

George Bevan turned the corner now, walking slowly, and, it seemed to Mac, gloomily towards the stage door. He was a young man of about twenty-seven, tall and well knit, with an agreeable, clean-cut face, of which a pair of good and honest eyes were the most noticeable feature. His sensitive mouth was drawn down a little at the corners, and he looked tired.

"Morning, Mac."

"Good morning, sir."

"Anything for me?"

"Yes, sir. Some telegrams. I'll get 'em. Oh, I'll get 'em," said Mac, as if reassuring some doubting friend and supporter as to his ability to carry through a labour of Hercules.

He disappeared into his glass case. George Bevan remained outside in the street surveying the frisking children with a sombre glance. They seemed to him very noisy, very dirty and very young. Disgustingly young. Theirs was joyous, exuberant youth which made a fellow feel at least sixty. Something was wrong with George today, for normally he was fond of children. Indeed, normally he was fond of most things. He was a good-natured and cheerful young man, who liked life and the great majority of those who lived it contemporaneously with himself. He had no enemies and many friends.

But today he had noticed from the moment he had got out of bed that something was amiss with the world. Either he was in the grip of some divine discontent due to the highly developed condition of his soul, or else he had a grouch. One of the two. Or it might have been the reaction from the emotions of the previous night. On the morning after an opening your sensitive artist is always apt to feel as if he had been dried over a barrel.

Besides, last night there had been a supper party after the performance at the flat which the comedian of the troupe had rented

in Jermyn Street, a forced, rowdy supper party where a number of tired people with over-strained nerves had seemed to feel it a duty to be artificially vivacious. It had lasted till four o'clock when the morning papers with the notices arrived, and George had not got to bed till four-thirty. These things colour the mental outlook.

Mac reappeared.

"Here you are, sir."

"Thanks."

George put the telegrams in his pocket. A cat, on its way back from lunch, paused beside him in order to use his leg as a serviette.

George tickled it under the ear abstractedly. He was always courteous to cats, but today he went through the movements perfunctorily and without enthusiasm.

The cat moved on. Mac became conversational.

"They tell me the piece was a hit last night, sir."

"It seemed to go very well."

"My Missus saw it from the gallery, and all the first-nighters was speaking very 'ighly of it. There's a regular click, you know, sir,

over here in London, that goes to all the first nights in the gallery. 'Ighly critical they are always. Specially if it's an American piece like this one. If they don't like it, they precious soon let you know. My missus ses they was all speakin' very 'ighly of it. My missus says she ain't seen a livelier show for a long time, and she's a great theatregoer. My missus says they was all specially pleased with the music."

"That's good."

"The Morning Leader give it a fine write-up. How was the rest of the papers?"

"Splendid, all of them. I haven't seen the evening papers yet. I came out to get them."

Mac looked down the street.

"There'll be a rehearsal this afternoon, I suppose, sir? Here's Miss Dore coming along."

George followed his glance. A tall girl in a tailor-made suit of blue was coming towards them. Even at a distance one caught the genial personality of the new arrival. It seemed to go before her like a heartening breeze. She picked her way carefully through the children crawling on the side walk. She stopped for a moment and

said something to one of them. The child grinned. Even the proprietor of the grocery store appeared to brighten up at the sight of her, as at the sight of some old friend.

"How's business, Bill?" she called to him as she passed the spot where he stood brooding on the mortality of tomatoes. And, though he replied "Rotten", a faint, grim smile did nevertheless flicker across his tragic mask.

Billie Dore, who was one of the chorus of George Bevan's musical comedy, had an attractive face, a mouth that laughed readily, rather bright golden hair (which, she was fond of insisting with perfect truth, was genuine though appearances were against it), and steady blue eyes. The latter were frequently employed by her in quelling admirers who were encouraged by the former to become too ardent. Billie's views on the opposite sex who forgot themselves were as rigid as those of Lord Marshmoreton concerning thrips. She liked men, and she would signify this liking in a practical manner by lunching and dining with them, but she was entirely self-supporting, and when men overlooked that fact she reminded them of it in no uncertain voice; for she was a girl of ready speech and direct.

"Morning, George. 'Morning, Mac. Any mail?"

"I'll see, miss."

"How did your better four-fifths like the show, Mac?"

"I was just telling Mr. Bevan, miss, that the missus said she 'adn't seen a livelier show for a long time."

"Fine. I knew I'd be a hit. Well, George, how's the boy this bright afternoon?"

"Limp and pessimistic."

"That comes of sitting up till four in the morning with festive hams."

"You were up as late as I was, and you look like Little Eva after a night of sweet, childish slumber."

"Yes, but I drank ginger ale, and didn't smoke eighteen cigars. And yet, I don't know. I think I must be getting old, George. All-night parties seem to have lost their charm. I was ready to quit at one o'clock, but it didn't seem matey. I think I'll marry a farmer and settle down."

George was amazed. He had not expected to find his present view of life shared in this quarter.

"I was just thinking myself," he said, feeling not for the first time how different Billie was from the majority of those with whom his profession brought him in contact, "how flat it all was. The show business I mean, and these darned first nights, and the party after the show which you can't sidestep. Something tells me I'm about through."

Billie Dore nodded.

"Anybody with any sense is always about through with the show business. I know I am. If you think I'm wedded to my art, let me tell you I'm going to get a divorce the first chance that comes along. It's funny about the show business. The way one drifts into it and sticks, I mean. Take me, for example. Nature had it all doped out for me to be the Belle of Hicks Corners. What I ought to have done was to buy a gingham bonnet and milk cows. But I would come to the great city and help brighten up the tired business man."

"I didn't know you were fond of the country, Billie."

"Me? I wrote the words and music. Didn't you know I was a country kid? My dad ran a Bide a Wee Home for flowers, and I used to know them all by their middle names. He was a nursery gardener out in Indiana. I tell you, when I see a rose nowadays, I shake its hand and say: 'Well, well, Cyril, how's everything with you? And how are

Joe and Jack and Jimmy and all the rest of the boys at home?' Do you know how I used to put in my time the first few nights I was over here in London? I used to hang around Covent Garden with my head back, sniffing. The boys that mess about with the flowers there used to stub their toes on me so often that they got to look on me as part of the scenery."

"That's where we ought to have been last night."

"We'd have had a better time. Say, George, did you see the awful mistake on Nature's part that Babe Sinclair showed up with towards the middle of the proceedings? You must have noticed him, because he took up more room than any one man was entitled to. His name was Spenser Gray."

George recalled having been introduced to a fat man of his own age who answered to that name.

"It's a darned shame," said Billie indignantly. "Babe is only a kid. This is the first show she's been in. And I happen to know there's an awfully nice boy over in New York crazy to marry her. And I'm certain this gink is giving her a raw deal. He tried to get hold of me about a week ago, but I turned him down hard; and I suppose he thinks Babe is easier. And it's no good talking to her; she thinks he's wonderful. That's another kick I have against the show business. It seems to make girls such darned chumps. Well, I

wonder how much longer Mr. Arbuckle is going to be retrieving my mail. What ho, within there, Fatty!"

Mac came out, apologetic, carrying letters.

"Sorry, miss. By an oversight I put you among the G's."

"All's well that ends well. 'Put me among the G's.' There's a good title for a song for you, George. Excuse me while I grapple with the correspondence. I'll bet half of these are mash notes. I got three between the first and second acts last night. Why the nobility and gentry of this burg should think that I'm their affinity just because I've got golden hair--which is perfectly genuine, Mac; I can show you the pedigree--and because I earn an honest living singing off the key, is more than I can understand."

Mac leaned his massive shoulders comfortably against the building, and resumed his chat.

"I expect you're feeling very 'appy today, sir?"

George pondered. He was certainly feeling better since he had seen Billie Dore, but he was far from being himself.

"I ought to be, I suppose. But I'm not."

"Ah, you're getting blarzy, sir, that's what it is. You've 'ad too much of the fat, you 'ave. This piece was a big 'it in America, wasn't it?"

"Yes. It ran over a year in New York, and there are three companies of it out now."

"That's 'ow it is, you see. You've gone and got blarzy. Too big a 'elping of success, you've 'ad." Mac wagged a head like a harvest moon. "You aren't a married man, are you, sir?"

Billie Dore finished skimming through her mail, and crumpled the letters up into a large ball, which she handed to Mac.

"Here's something for you to read in your spare moments, Mac. Glance through them any time you have a suspicion you may be a chump, and you'll have the comfort of knowing that there are others. What were you saying about being married?"

"Mr. Bevan and I was 'aving a talk about 'im being blarzy, miss."

"Are you blarzy, George?"

"So Mac says."

"And why is he blarzy, miss?" demanded Mac rhetorically.

"Don't ask me," said Billie. "It's not my fault."

"It's because, as I was saying, 'e's 'ad too big a 'elping of success, and because 'e ain't a married man. You did say you wasn't a married man, didn't you, sir?"

"I didn't. But I'm not."

"That's 'ow it is, you see. You pretty soon gets sick of pulling off good things, if you ain't got nobody to pat you on the back for doing of it. Why, when I was single, if I got 'old of a sure thing for the three o'clock race and picked up a couple of quid, the thrill of it didn't seem to linger somehow. But now, if some of the gentlemen that come 'ere put me on to something safe and I make a bit, 'arf the fascination of it is taking the stuff 'ome and rolling it on to the kitchen table and 'aving 'er pat me on the back."

"How about when you lose?"

"I don't tell 'er," said Mac simply.

"You seem to understand the art of being happy, Mac."

"It ain't an art, sir. It's just gettin' 'old of the right little

woman, and 'aving a nice little 'ome of your own to go back to at night."

"Mac," said Billie admiringly, "you talk like a Tin Pan Alley song hit, except that you've left out the scent of honeysuckle and Old Mister Moon climbing up over the trees. Well, you're quite right. I'm all for the simple and domestic myself. If I could find the right man, and he didn't see me coming and duck, I'd become one of the Mendelssohn's March Daughters right away. Are you going, George? There's a rehearsal at two-thirty for cuts."

"I want to get the evening papers and send off a cable or two. See you later."

"We shall meet at Philippi."

Mac eyed George's retreating back till he had turned the corner.

"A nice pleasant gentleman, Mr. Bevan," he said. "Too bad 'e's got the pip the way 'e 'as, just after 'avin' a big success like this 'ere. Comes of bein' a artist, I suppose."

Miss Dore dived into her vanity case and produced a puff with which she proceeded to powder her nose.

"All composers are nuts, Mac. I was in a show once where the

manager was panning the composer because there wasn't a number in the score that had a tune to it. The poor geek admitted they weren't very tuney, but said the thing about his music was that it had such a wonderful aroma. They all get that way. The jazz seems to go to their heads. George is all right, though, and don't let anyone tell you different."

"Have you know him long, miss?"

"About five years. I was a stenographer in the house that published his songs when I first met him. And there's another thing you've got to hand it to George for. He hasn't let success give him a swelled head. The money that boy makes is sinful, Mac. He wears thousand dollar bills next to his skin winter and summer. But he's just the same as he was when I first knew him, when he was just hanging around Broadway, looking out for a chance to be allowed to slip a couple of interpolated numbers into any old show that came along. Yes. Put it in your diary, Mac, and write it on your cuff, George Bevan's all right. He's an ace."

Unconscious of these eulogies, which, coming from one whose judgment he respected, might have cheered him up, George wandered down Shaftesbury Avenue feeling more depressed than ever. The sun had gone in for the time being, and the east wind was frolicking round him like a playful puppy, patting him with a cold paw, nuzzling his ankles, bounding away and bounding back again, and

behaving generally as east winds do when they discover a victim who has come out without his spring overcoat. It was plain to George now that the sun and the wind were a couple of confidence tricksters working together as a team. The sun had disarmed him with specious promises and an air of cheery goodfellowship, and had delivered him into the hands of the wind, which was now going through him with the swift thoroughness of the professional hold-up artist. He quickened his steps, and began to wonder if he was so sunk in senile decay as to have acquired a liver.

He discarded the theory as repellent. And yet there must be a reason for his depression. Today of all days, as Mac had pointed out, he had everything to make him happy. Popular as he was in America, this was the first piece of his to be produced in London, and there was no doubt that it was a success of unusual dimensions. And yet he felt no elation.

He reached Piccadilly and turned westwards. And then, as he passed the gates of the In and Out Club, he had a moment of clear vision and understood everything. He was depressed because he was bored, and he was bored because he was lonely. Mac, that solid thinker, had been right. The solution of the problem of life was to get hold of the right girl and have a home to go back to at night. He was mildly surprised that he had tried in any other direction for an explanation of his gloom. It was all the more inexplicable in that fully 80 per cent of the lyrics which he had set in the course of

his musical comedy career had had that thought at the back of them.

George gave himself up to an orgy of sentimentality. He seemed to be alone in the world which had paired itself off into a sort of seething welter of happy couples. Taxicabs full of happy couples rolled by every minute. Passing omnibuses creaked beneath the weight of happy couples. The very policeman across the Street had just grinned at a flitting shop girl, and she had smiled back at him. The only female in London who did not appear to be attached was a girl in brown who was coming along the sidewalk at a leisurely pace, looking about her in a manner that suggested that she found Piccadilly a new and stimulating spectacle.

As far as George could see she was an extremely pretty girl, small and dainty, with a proud little tilt to her head and the jaunty walk that spoke of perfect health. She was, in fact, precisely the sort of girl that George felt he could love with all the stored-up devotion of an old buffer of twenty-seven who had squandered none of his rich nature in foolish flirtations. He had just begun to weave a rose-tinted romance about their two selves, when a cold reaction set in. Even as he paused to watch the girl threading her way through the crowd, the east wind jabbed an icy finger down the back of his neck, and the chill of it sobered him. After all, he reflected bitterly, this girl was only alone because she was on her way somewhere to meet some confounded man. Besides there was no earthly chance of getting to know her. You can't rush up to pretty

girls in the street and tell them you are lonely. At least, you can, but it doesn't get you anywhere except the police station. George's gloom deepened--a thing he would not have believed possible a moment before. He felt that he had been born too late. The restraints of modern civilization irked him. It was not, he told himself, like this in the good old days.

In the Middle Ages, for example, this girl would have been a Damsel; and in that happy time practically everybody whose technical rating was that of Damsel was in distress and only too willing to waive the formalities in return for services rendered by the casual passer-by. But the twentieth century is a prosaic age, when girls are merely girls and have no troubles at all. Were he to stop this girl in brown and assure her that his aid and comfort were at her disposal, she would undoubtedly call that large policeman from across the way, and the romance would begin and end within the space of thirty seconds, or, if the policeman were a quick mover, rather less.

Better to dismiss dreams and return to the practical side of life by buying the evening papers from the shabby individual beside him, who had just thrust an early edition in his face. After all notices are notices, even when the heart is aching. George felt in his pocket for the necessary money, found emptiness, and remembered that he had left all his ready funds at his hotel. It was just one of the things he might have expected on a day like this.

The man with the papers had the air of one whose business is conducted on purely cash principles. There was only one thing to be done, return to the hotel, retrieve his money, and try to forget the weight of the world and its cares in lunch. And from the hotel he could despatch the two or three cables which he wanted to send to New York.

The girl in brown was quite close now, and George was enabled to get a clearer glimpse of her. She more than fulfilled the promise she had given at a distance. Had she been constructed to his own specifications, she would not have been more acceptable in George's sight. And now she was going out of his life for ever. With an overwhelming sense of pathos, for there is no pathos more bitter than that of parting from someone we have never met, George hailed a taxicab which crawled at the side of the road; and, with all the refrains of all the sentimental song hits he had ever composed ringing in his ears, he got in and passed away.

"A rotten world," he mused, as the cab, after proceeding a couple of yards, came to a standstill in a block of the traffic. "A dull, flat bore of a world, in which nothing happens or ever will happen. Even when you take a cab it just sticks and doesn't move."

At this point the door of the cab opened, and the girl in brown jumped in.

"I'm so sorry," she said breathlessly, "but would you mind hiding me, please."