

CHAPTER 3.

George hid her. He did it, too, without wasting precious time by asking questions. In a situation which might well have thrown the quickest-witted of men off his balance, he acted with promptitude, intelligence and despatch. The fact is, George had for years been an assiduous golfer; and there is no finer school for teaching concentration and a strict attention to the matter in hand. Few crises, however unexpected, have the power to disturb a man who has so conquered the weakness of the flesh as to have trained himself to bend his left knee, raise his left heel, swing his arms well out from the body, twist himself into the shape of a corkscrew and use the muscle of the wrist, at the same time keeping his head still and his eye on the ball. It is estimated that there are twenty-three important points to be borne in mind simultaneously while making a drive at golf; and to the man who has mastered the art of remembering them all the task of hiding girls in taxicabs is mere child's play. To pull down the blinds on the side of the vehicle nearest the kerb was with George the work of a moment. Then he leaned out of the centre window in such a manner as completely to screen the interior of the cab from public view.

"Thank you so much," murmured a voice behind him. It seemed to come from the floor.

"Not at all," said George, trying a sort of vocal chip-shot out of

the corner of his mouth, designed to lift his voice backwards and lay it dead inside the cab.

He gazed upon Piccadilly with eyes from which the scales had fallen. Reason told him that he was still in Piccadilly. Otherwise it would have seemed incredible to him that this could be the same street which a moment before he had passed judgment upon and found flat and uninteresting. True, in its salient features it had altered little. The same number of stodgy-looking people moved up and down. The buildings retained their air of not having had a bath since the days of the Tudors. The east wind still blew. But, though superficially the same, in reality Piccadilly had altered completely. Before it had been just Piccadilly. Now it was a golden street in the City of Romance, a main thoroughfare of Bagdad, one of the principal arteries of the capital of Fairyland. A rose-coloured mist swam before George's eyes. His spirits, so low but a few moments back, soared like a good niblick shot out of the bunker of Gloom. The years fell away from him till, in an instant, from being a rather poorly preserved, liverish greybeard of sixty-five or so, he became a sprightly lad of twenty-one in a world of springtime and flowers and laughing brooks. In other words, taking it by and large, George felt pretty good. The impossible had happened; Heaven had sent him an adventure, and he didn't care if it snowed.

It was possibly the rose-coloured mist before his eyes that

prevented him from observing the hurried approach of a faultlessly attired young man, aged about twenty-one, who during George's preparations for ensuring privacy in his cab had been galloping in pursuit in a resolute manner that suggested a well-dressed bloodhound somewhat overfed and out of condition. Only when this person stopped and began to pant within a few inches of his face did he become aware of his existence.

"You, sir!" said the bloodhound, removing a gleaming silk hat, mopping a pink forehead, and replacing the luminous superstructure once more in position. "You, sir!"

Whatever may be said of the possibility of love at first sight, in which theory George was now a confirmed believer, there can be no doubt that an exactly opposite phenomenon is of frequent occurrence. After one look at some people even friendship is impossible. Such a one, in George's opinion, was this gurgling excrescence underneath the silk hat. He comprised in his single person practically all the qualities which George disliked most. He was, for a young man, extraordinarily obese. Already a second edition of his chin had been published, and the perfectly-cut morning coat which encased his upper section bulged out in an opulent semi-circle. He wore a little moustache, which to George's prejudiced eye seemed more a complaint than a moustache. His face was red, his manner dictatorial, and he was touched in the wind. Take him for all in all he looked like a bit of bad news.

George had been educated at Lawrenceville and Harvard, and had subsequently had the privilege of mixing socially with many of New York's most prominent theatrical managers; so he knew how to behave himself. No Vere de Vere could have exhibited greater repose of manner.

"And what," he inquired suavely, leaning a little further out of the cab, "is eating you, Bill?"

A messenger boy, two shabby men engaged in non-essential industries, and a shop girl paused to observe the scene. Time was not of the essence to these confirmed sightseers. The shop girl was late already, so it didn't matter if she was any later; the messenger boy had nothing on hand except a message marked "Important: Rush"; and as for the two shabby men, their only immediate plans consisted of a vague intention of getting to some public house and leaning against the wall; so George's time was their time. One of the pair put his head on one side and said: "What ho!"; the other picked up a cigar stub from the gutter and began to smoke.

"A young lady just got into your cab," said the stout young man.

"Surely not?" said George.

"What the devil do you mean--surely not?"

"I've been in the cab all the time, and I should have noticed it."

At this juncture the block in the traffic was relieved, and the cab bowled smartly on for some fifty yards when it was again halted. George, protruding from the window like a snail, was entertained by the spectacle of the pursuit. The hunt was up. Short of throwing his head up and baying, the stout young man behaved exactly as a bloodhound in similar circumstances would have conducted itself. He broke into a jerky gallop, attended by his self-appointed associates; and, considering that the young man was so stout, that the messenger boy considered it unprofessional to hurry, that the shop girl had doubts as to whether sprinting was quite ladylike, and that the two Bohemians were moving at a quicker gait than a shuffle for the first occasion in eleven years, the cavalcade made good time. The cab was still stationary when they arrived in a body.

"Here he is, guv'nor," said the messenger boy, removing a bead of perspiration with the rush message.

"Here he is, guv'nor," said the non-smoking Bohemian. "What oh!"

"Here I am!" agreed George affably. "And what can I do for you?"

The smoker spat appreciatively at a passing dog. The point seemed to him well taken. Not for many a day had he so enjoyed himself. In an arid world containing too few goes of gin and too many policemen, a world in which the poor were oppressed and could seldom even enjoy a quiet cigar without having their fingers trodden upon, he found himself for the moment contented, happy, and expectant. This looked like a row between toffs, and of all things which most intrigued him a row between toffs ranked highest.

"R!" he said approvingly. "Now you're torkin'!"

The shop girl had espied an acquaintance in the crowd. She gave tongue.

"Mordee! Cummere! Cummere quick! Sumfin' hap'nin'!" Maudie, accompanied by perhaps a dozen more of London's millions, added herself to the audience. These all belonged to the class which will gather round and watch silently while a motorist mends a tyre. They are not impatient. They do not call for rapid and continuous action. A mere hole in the ground, which of all sights is perhaps the least vivid and dramatic, is enough to grip their attention for hours at a time. They stared at George and George's cab with unblinking gaze. They did not know what would happen or when it would happen, but they intended to wait till something did happen. It might be for years or it might be for ever, but they meant to be there when things began to occur.

Speculations became audible.

"Wot is it? 'Naccident?"

"Nah! Gent 'ad 'is pocket picked!"

"Two toffs 'ad a scrap!"

"Feller bilked the cabman!"

A sceptic made a cynical suggestion.

"They're doin' of it for the pictures."

The idea gained instant popularity.

"Jear that? It's a fillum!"

"Wot o', Charlie!"

"The kemerer's 'idden in the keb."

"Wot'll they be up to next!"

A red-nosed spectator with a tray of collar-studs harnessed to his

stomach started another school of thought. He spoke with decision as one having authority.

"Nothin' of the blinkin' kind! The fat 'un's bin 'avin' one or two around the corner, and it's gorn and got into 'is 'ead!"

The driver of the cab, who till now had been ostentatiously unaware that there was any sort of disturbance among the lower orders, suddenly became humanly inquisitive.

"What's it all about?" he asked, swinging around and addressing George's head.

"Exactly what I want to know," said George. He indicated the collar-stud merchant. "The gentleman over there with the portable Woolworth-bargain-counter seems to me to have the best theory."

The stout young man, whose peculiar behaviour had drawn all this flattering attention from the many-headed and who appeared considerably ruffled by the publicity, had been puffing noisily during the foregoing conversation. Now, having recovered sufficient breath to resume the attack, he addressed himself to George once more.

"Damn you, sir, will you let me look inside that cab?"

"Leave me," said George, "I would be alone."

"There is a young lady in that cab. I saw her get in, and I have been watching ever since, and she has not got out, so she is there now."

George nodded approval of this close reasoning.

"Your argument seems to be without a flaw. But what then? We applaud the Man of Logic, but what of the Man of Action? What are you going to do about it?"

"Get out of my way!"

"I won't."

"Then I'll force my way in!"

"If you try it, I shall infallibly bust you one on the jaw."

The stout young man drew back a pace.

"You can't do that sort of thing, you know."

"I know I can't," said George, "but I shall. In this life, my dear sir, we must be prepared for every emergency. We must distinguish

between the unusual and the impossible. It would be unusual for a comparative stranger to lean out of a cab window and sock you one, but you appear to have laid your plans on the assumption that it would be impossible. Let this be a lesson to you!"

"I tell you what it is--"

"The advice I give to every young man starting life is 'Never confuse the unusual with the impossible!' Take the present case, for instance. If you had only realized the possibility of somebody some day busting you on the jaw when you tried to get into a cab, you might have thought out dozens of crafty schemes for dealing with the matter. As it is, you are unprepared. The thing comes on you as a surprise. The whisper flies around the clubs: 'Poor old What's-his-name has been taken unawares. He cannot cope with the situation!'"

The man with the collar-studs made another diagnosis. He was seeing clearer and clearer into the thing every minute.

"Looney!" he decided. "This 'ere one's bin moppin' of it up, and the one in the keb's orf 'is bloomin' onion. That's why 'e 's standin' up instead of settin'. 'E won't set down 'cept you bring 'im a bit o' toast, 'cos he thinks 'e 's a poached egg."

George beamed upon the intelligent fellow.

"Your reasoning is admirable, but--"

He broke off here, not because he had not more to say, but for the reason that the stout young man, now in quite a Berserk frame of mind, made a sudden spring at the cab door and clutched the handle, which he was about to wrench when George acted with all the promptitude and decision which had marked his behaviour from the start.

It was a situation which called for the nicest judgment. To allow the assailant free play with the handle or even to wrestle with him for its possession entailed the risk that the door might open and reveal the girl. To bust the young man on the jaw, as promised, on the other hand, was not in George's eyes a practical policy.

Excellent a deterrent as the threat of such a proceeding might be, its actual accomplishment was not to be thought of. Gaols yawn and actions for assault lie in wait for those who go about the place busting their fellows on the jaw. No. Something swift, something decided and immediate was indicated, but something that stopped short of technical battery.

George brought his hand round with a sweep and knocked the stout young man's silk hat off.

The effect was magical. We all of us have our Achilles heel,

and--paradoxically enough--in the case of the stout young man that heel was his hat. Superbly built by the only hatter in London who can construct a silk hat that is a silk hat, and freshly ironed by loving hands but a brief hour before at the only shaving-parlour in London where ironing is ironing and not a brutal attack, it was his pride and joy. To lose it was like losing his trousers. It made him feel insufficiently clad. With a passionate cry like that of some wild creature deprived of its young, the erstwhile Berserk released the handle and sprang in pursuit. At the same moment the traffic moved on again.

The last George saw was a group scene with the stout young man in the middle of it. The hat had been popped up into the infield, where it had been caught by the messenger boy. The stout young man was bending over it and stroking it with soothing fingers. It was too far off for anything to be audible, but he seemed to George to be murmuring words of endearment to it. Then, placing it on his head, he darted out into the road and George saw him no more. The audience remained motionless, staring at the spot where the incident had happened. They would continue to do this till the next policeman came along and moved them on.

With a pleasant wave of farewell, in case any of them might be glancing in his direction, George drew in his body and sat down.

The girl in brown had risen from the floor, if she had ever been

there, and was now seated composedly at the further end of the cab.