

CHAPTER 4.

"Well, that's that!" said George.

"I'm so much obliged," said the girl.

"It was a pleasure," said George.

He was enabled now to get a closer, more leisurely and much more satisfactory view of this distressed damsel than had been his good fortune up to the present. Small details which, when he had first caught sight of her, distance had hidden from his view, now presented themselves. Her eyes, he discovered, which he had supposed brown, were only brown in their general colour-scheme. They were shot with attractive little flecks of gold, matching perfectly the little streaks gold which the sun, coming out again on one of his flying visits and now shining benignantly once more on the world, revealed in her hair. Her chin was square and determined, but its resoluteness was contradicted by a dimple and by the pleasant good-humour of the mouth; and a further softening of the face was effected by the nose, which seemed to have started out with the intention of being dignified and aristocratic but had defeated its purpose by tilting very slightly at the tip. This was a girl who would take chances, but would take them with a smile and laugh when she lost.

George was but an amateur physiognomist, but he could read what was obvious in the faces he encountered; and the more he looked at this girl, the less he was able to understand the scene which had just occurred. The thing mystified him completely. For all her good-humour, there was an air, a manner, a something capable and defensive, about this girl with which he could not imagine any man venturing to take liberties. The gold-brown eyes, as they met his now, were friendly and smiling, but he could imagine them freezing into a stare baleful enough and haughty enough to quell such a person as the silk-hatted young man with a single glance. Why, then, had that super-fatted individual been able to demoralize her to the extent of flying to the shelter of strange cabs? She was composed enough now, it was true, but it had been quite plain that at the moment when she entered the taxi her nerve had momentarily forsaken her. There were mysteries here, beyond George.

The girl looked steadily at George and George looked steadily at her for the space of perhaps ten seconds. She seemed to George to be summing him up, weighing him. That the inspection proved satisfactory was shown by the fact that at the end of this period she smiled. Then she laughed, a clear peeling laugh which to George was far more musical than the most popular song-hit he had ever written.

"I suppose you are wondering what it's all about?" she said.

This was precisely what George was wondering most consumedly.

"No, no," he said. "Not at all. It's not my business."

"And of course you're much too well bred to be inquisitive about other people's business?"

"Of course I am. What was it all about?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you."

"But what am I to say to the cabman?"

"I don't know. What do men usually say to cabmen?"

"I mean he will feel very hurt if I don't give him a full explanation of all this. He stooped from his pedestal to make enquiries just now. Condescension like that deserves some recognition."

"Give him a nice big tip."

George was reminded of his reason for being in the cab.

"I ought to have asked before," he said. "Where can I drive you?"

"Oh, I mustn't steal your cab. Where were you going?"

"I was going back to my hotel. I came out without any money, so I shall have to go there first to get some."

The girl started.

"What's the matter?" asked George.

"I've lost my purse!"

"Good Lord! Had it much in it?"

"Not very much. But enough to buy a ticket home."

"Any use asking where that is?"

"None, I'm afraid."

"I wasn't going to, of course."

"Of course not. That's what I admire so much in you. You aren't inquisitive."

George reflected.

"There's only one thing to be done. You will have to wait in the cab at the hotel, while I go and get some money. Then, if you'll let me, I can lend you what you require."

"It's much too kind of you. Could you manage eleven shillings?"

"Easily. I've just had a legacy."

"Of course, if you think I ought to be economical, I'll go third-class. That would only be five shillings. Ten-and-six is the first-class fare. So you see the place I want to get to is two hours from London."

"Well, that's something to know."

"But not much, is it?"

"I think I had better lend you a sovereign. Then you'll be able to buy a lunch-basket."

"You think of everything. And you're perfectly right. I shall be starving. But how do you know you will get the money back?"

"I'll risk it."

"Well, then, I shall have to be inquisitive and ask your name."

Otherwise I shan't know where to send the money."

"Oh, there's no mystery about me. I'm an open book."

"You needn't be horrid about it. I can't help being mysterious."

"I didn't mean that."

"It sounded as if you did. Well, who is my benefactor?"

"My name is George Bevan. I am staying at the Carlton at present."

"I'll remember."

The taxi moved slowly down the Haymarket. The girl laughed.

"Yes?" said George.

"I was only thinking of back there. You know, I haven't thanked you nearly enough for all you did. You were wonderful."

"I'm very glad I was able to be of any help."

"What did happen? You must remember I couldn't see a thing except your back, and I could only hear indistinctly."

"Well, it started by a man galloping up and insisting that you had got into the cab. He was a fellow with the appearance of a before-using advertisement of an anti-fat medicine and the manners of a ring-tailed chimpanzee."

The girl nodded.

"Then it was Percy! I knew I wasn't mistaken."

"Percy?"

"That is his name."

"It would be! I could have betted on it."

"What happened then?"

"I reasoned with the man, but didn't seem to soothe him, and finally he made a grab for the door-handle, so I knocked off his hat, and while he was retrieving it we moved on and escaped."

The girl gave another silver peal of laughter.

"Oh, what a shame I couldn't see it. But how resourceful of you! How did you happen to think of it?"

"It just came to me," said George modestly.

A serious look came into the girl's face. The smile died out of her eyes. She shivered.

"When I think how some men might have behaved in your place!"

"Oh, no. Any man would have done just what I did. Surely, knocking off Percy's hat was an act of simple courtesy which anyone would have performed automatically!"

"You might have been some awful bounder. Or, what would have been almost worse, a slow-witted idiot who would have stopped to ask questions before doing anything. To think I should have had the luck to pick you out of all London!"

"I've been looking on it as a piece of luck--but entirely from my viewpoint."

She put a small hand on his arm, and spoke earnestly.

"Mr. Bevan, you mustn't think that, because I've been laughing a good deal and have seemed to treat all this as a joke, you haven't saved me from real trouble. If you hadn't been there and hadn't acted with such presence of mind, it would have been terrible!"

"But surely, if that fellow was annoying you, you could have called a policeman?"

"Oh, it wasn't anything like that. It was much, much worse. But I mustn't go on like this. It isn't fair on you." Her eyes lit up again with the old shining smile. "I know you have no curiosity about me, but still there's no knowing whether I might not arouse some if I went on piling up the mystery. And the silly part is that really there's no mystery at all. It's just that I can't tell anyone about it."

"That very fact seems to me to constitute the makings of a pretty fair mystery."

"Well, what I mean is, I'm not a princess in disguise trying to escape from anarchists, or anything like those things you read about in books. I'm just in a perfectly simple piece of trouble. You would be bored to death if I told you about it."

"Try me."

She shook her head.

"No. Besides, here we are." The cab had stopped at the hotel, and a commissionaire was already opening the door. "Now, if you haven't repented of your rash offer and really are going to be so awfully

kind as to let me have that money, would you mind rushing off and getting it, because I must hurry. I can just catch a good train, and it's hours to the next."

"Will you wait here? I'll be back in a moment."

"Very well."

The last George saw of her was another of those exhilarating smiles of hers. It was literally the last he saw of her, for, when he returned not more than two minutes later, the cab had gone, the girl had gone, and the world was empty.

To him, gaping at this wholly unforeseen calamity the commissionaire vouchsafed information.

"The young lady took the cab on, sir."

"Took the cab on?"

"Almost immediately after you had gone, sir, she got in again and told the man to drive to Waterloo."

George could make nothing of it. He stood there in silent perplexity, and might have continued to stand indefinitely, had not his mind been distracted by a dictatorial voice at his elbow.

"You, sir! Dammit!"

A second taxi-cab had pulled up, and from it a stout, scarlet-faced young man had sprung. One glance told George all. The hunt was up once more. The bloodhound had picked up the trail. Percy was in again!

For the first time since he had become aware of her flight, George was thankful that the girl had disappeared. He perceived that he had too quickly eliminated Percy from the list of the Things That Matter. Engrossed with his own affairs, and having regarded their late skirmish as a decisive battle from which there would be no rallying, he had overlooked the possibility of this annoying and unnecessary person following them in another cab--a task which, in the congested, slow-moving traffic, must have been a perfectly simple one. Well, here he was, his soul manifestly all stirred up and his blood-pressure at a far higher figure than his doctor would have approved of, and the matter would have to be opened all over again.

"Now then!" said the stout young man.

George regarded him with a critical and unfriendly eye. He disliked this fatty degeneration excessively. Looking him up and down, he could find no point about him that gave him the least pleasure,

with the single exception of the state of his hat, in the side of which he was rejoiced to perceive there was a large and unshapely dent.

"You thought you had shaken me off! You thought you'd given me the slip! Well, you're wrong!"

George eyed him coldly.

"I know what's the matter with you," he said. "Someone's been feeding you meat."

The young man bubbled with fury. His face turned a deeper scarlet. He gesticulated.

"You blackguard! Where's my sister?"

At this extraordinary remark the world rocked about George dizzily. The words upset his entire diagnosis of the situation. Until that moment he had looked upon this man as a Lothario, a pursuer of damsels. That the other could possibly have any right on his side had never occurred to him. He felt unmanned by the shock. It seemed to cut the ground from under his feet.

"Your sister!"

"You heard what I said. Where is she?"

George was still endeavouring to adjust his scattered faculties. He felt foolish and apologetic. He had imagined himself unassailably in the right, and it now appeared that he was in the wrong.

For a moment he was about to become conciliatory. Then the recollection of the girl's panic and her hints at some trouble which threatened her--presumably through the medium of this man, brother or no brother--checked him. He did not know what it was all about, but the one thing that did stand out clearly in the welter of confused happenings was the girl's need for his assistance. Whatever might be the rights of the case, he was her accomplice, and must behave as such.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

The young man shook a large, gloved fist in his face.

"You blackguard!"

A rich, deep, soft, soothing voice slid into the heated scene like the Holy Grail sliding athwart a sunbeam.

"What's all this?"

A vast policeman had materialized from nowhere. He stood beside them, a living statue of Vigilant Authority. One thumb rested easily on his broad belt. The fingers of the other hand caressed lightly a moustache that had caused more heart-burnings among the gentler sex than any other two moustaches in the C-division. The eyes above the moustache were stern and questioning.

"What's all this?"

George liked policemen. He knew the way to treat them. His voice, when he replied, had precisely the correct note of respectful deference which the Force likes to hear.

"I really couldn't say, officer," he said, with just that air of having in a time of trouble found a kind elder brother to help him out of his difficulties which made the constable his ally on the spot. "I was standing here, when this man suddenly made his extraordinary attack on me. I wish you would ask him to go away."

The policeman tapped the stout young man on the shoulder.

"This won't do, you know!" he said austerely. "This sort o' thing won't do, 'ere, you know!"

"Take your hands off me!" snorted Percy.

A frown appeared on the Olympian brow. Jove reached for his thunderbolts.

"'Ullo! 'Ullo! 'Ullo!" he said in a shocked voice, as of a god defied by a mortal. "'Ullo! 'Ullo! 'Ul-lo!"

His fingers fell on Percy's shoulder again, but this time not in a mere warning tap. They rested where they fell--in an iron clutch.

"It won't do, you know," he said. "This sort o' thing won't do!"

Madness came upon the stout young man. Common prudence and the lessons of a carefully-taught youth fell from him like a garment.

With an incoherent howl he wriggled round and punched the policeman smartly in the stomach.

"Ho!" quoth the outraged officer, suddenly becoming human. His left hand removed itself from the belt, and he got a businesslike grip on his adversary's collar. "Will you come along with me!"

It was amazing. The thing had happened in such an incredibly brief space of time. One moment, it seemed to George, he was the centre of a nasty row in one of the most public spots in London; the next, the focus had shifted; he had ceased to matter; and the entire attention of the metropolis was focused on his late assailant, as, urged by the arm of the Law, he made that journey to Vine Street Police Station which so many a better man than he had trod.

George watched the pair as they moved up the Haymarket, followed by a growing and increasingly absorbed crowd; then he turned into the hotel.

"This," he said to himself; "is the middle of a perfect day! And I thought London dull!"