CHAPTER 5.

George awoke next morning with a misty sense that somehow the world had changed. As the last remnants of sleep left him, he was aware of a vague excitement. Then he sat up in bed with a jerk. He had remembered that he was in love.

There was no doubt about it. A curious happiness pervaded his entire being. He felt young and active. Everything was emphatically for the best in this best of all possible worlds. The sun was shining. Even the sound of someone in the street below whistling one of his old compositions, of which he had heartily sickened twelve months before, was pleasant to his ears, and this in spite of the fact that the unseen whistler only touched the key in odd spots and had a poor memory for tunes. George sprang lightly out of bed, and turned on the cold tap in the bath-room. While he lathered his face for its morning shave he beamed at himself in the mirror.

It had come at last. The Real Thing.

George had never been in love before. Not really in love. True, from the age of fifteen, he had been in varying degrees of intensity attracted sentimentally by the opposite sex. Indeed, at that period of life of which Mr. Booth Tarkington has written so searchingly--the age of seventeen--he had been in love with practically every female he met and with dozens whom he had only

seen in the distance; but ripening years had mellowed his taste and robbed him of that fine romantic catholicity. During the last five years women had found him more or less cold. It was the nature of his profession that had largely brought about this cooling of the emotions. To a man who, like George, has worked year in and year out at the composition of musical comedies, woman comes to lose many of those attractive qualities which ensnare the ordinary male. To George, of late years, it had begun to seem that the salient feature of woman as a sex was her disposition to kick. For five years he had been wandering in a world of women, many of them beautiful, all of them superficially attractive, who had left no other impress on his memory except the vigour and frequency with which they had kicked. Some had kicked about their musical numbers, some about their love-scenes; some had grumbled about their exit lines, others about the lines of their second-act frocks. They had kicked in a myriad differing ways--wrathfully, sweetly, noisily, softly, smilingly, tearfully, pathetically and patronizingly; but they had all kicked; with the result that woman had now become to George not so much a flaming inspiration or a tender goddess as something to be dodged--tactfully, if possible; but, if not possible, by open flight. For years he had dreaded to be left alone with a woman, and had developed a habit of gliding swiftly away when he saw one bearing down on him.

The psychological effect of such a state of things is not difficult to realize. Take a man of naturally quixotic temperament, a man of

chivalrous instincts and a feeling for romance, and cut him off for five years from the exercise of those qualities, and you get an accumulated store of foolishness only comparable to an escape of gas in a sealed room or a cellarful of dynamite. A flicker of a match, and there is an explosion.

This girl's tempestuous irruption into his life had supplied flame for George. Her bright eyes, looking into his, had touched off the spiritual trinitrotoluol which he had been storing up for so long. Up in the air in a million pieces had gone the prudence and self-restraint of a lifetime. And here he was, as desperately in love as any troubadour of the Middle Ages.

It was not till he had finished shaving and was testing the temperature of his bath with a shrinking toe that the realization came over him in a wave that, though he might be in love, the fairway of love was dotted with more bunkers than any golf course he had ever played on in his life. In the first place, he did not know the girl's name. In the second place, it seemed practically impossible that he would ever see her again. Even in the midst of his optimism George could not deny that these facts might reasonably be considered in the nature of obstacles. He went back into his bedroom, and sat on the bed. This thing wanted thinking over.

He was not depressed--only a little thoughtful. His faith in his

luck sustained him. He was, he realized, in the position of a man who has made a supreme drive from the tee, and finds his ball near the green but in a cuppy lie. He had gained much; it now remained for him to push his success to the happy conclusion. The driver of Luck must be replaced by the spoon--or, possibly, the niblick--of Ingenuity. To fail now, to allow this girl to pass out of his life merely because he did not know who she was or where she was, would stamp him a feeble adventurer. A fellow could not expect Luck to do everything for him. He must supplement its assistance with his own efforts.

What had he to go on? Well, nothing much, if it came to that, except the knowledge that she lived some two hours by train out of London, and that her journey started from Waterloo Station. What would Sherlock Holmes have done? Concentrated thought supplied no answer to the question; and it was at this point that the cheery optimism with which he had begun the day left George and gave place to a grey gloom. A dreadful phrase, haunting in its pathos, crept into his mind. "Ships that pass in the night!" It might easily turn out that way. Indeed, thinking over the affair in all its aspects as he dried himself after his tub, George could not see how it could possibly turn out any other way.

He dressed moodily, and left the room to go down to breakfast. Breakfast would at least alleviate this sinking feeling which was unmanning him. And he could think more briskly after a cup or two

of coffee.

He opened the door. On a mat outside lay a letter.

The handwriting was feminine. It was also in pencil, and strange to him. He opened the envelope.

"Dear Mr. Bevan" (it began).

With a sudden leap of the heart he looked at the signature.

The letter was signed "The Girl in the Cab."

"DEAR MR. BEVAN,

"I hope you won't think me very rude, running off without waiting to say good-bye. I had to. I saw Percy driving up in a cab, and knew that he must have followed us. He did not see me, so I got away all right. I managed splendidly about the money, for I remembered that I was wearing a nice brooch, and stopped on the way to the station to pawn it.

"Thank you ever so much again for all your wonderful kindness.

Yours,

THE GIRL IN THE CAB."

George read the note twice on the way down to the breakfast room, and three times more during the meal; then, having committed its contents to memory down to the last comma, he gave himself up to glowing thoughts.

What a girl! He had never in his life before met a woman who could write a letter without a postscript, and this was but the smallest of her unusual gifts. The resource of her, to think of pawning that brooch! The sweetness of her to bother to send him a note! More than ever before was he convinced that he had met his ideal, and more than ever before was he determined that a triviality like being unaware of her name and address should not keep him from her. It was not as if he had no clue to go upon. He knew that she lived two hours from London and started home from Waterloo. It narrowed the thing down absurdly. There were only about three counties in which she could possibly live; and a man must be a poor fellow who is incapable of searching through a few small counties for the girl he loves. Especially a man with luck like his.

Luck is a goddess not to be coerced and forcibly wooed by those who seek her favours. From such masterful spirits she turns away. But

it happens sometimes that, if we put our hand in hers with the humble trust of a little child, she will have pity on us, and not fail us in our hour of need. On George, hopefully watching for something to turn up, she smiled almost immediately.

It was George's practice, when he lunched alone, to relieve the tedium of the meal with the assistance of reading matter in the shape of one or more of the evening papers. Today, sitting down to a solitary repast at the Piccadilly grill-room, he had brought with him an early edition of the Evening News. And one of the first items which met his eye was the following, embodied in a column on one of the inner pages devoted to humorous comments in prose and verse on the happenings of the day. This particular happening the writer had apparently considered worthy of being dignified by rhyme. It was headed:

"THE PEER AND THE POLICEMAN."

"Outside the 'Carlton,' 'tis averred, these stirring happenings occurred. The hour, 'tis said (and no one doubts) was half-past two, or thereabouts. The day was fair, the sky was blue, and everything was peaceful too, when suddenly a well-dressed gent engaged in heated argument and roundly to abuse began another well-dressed gentleman. His suede-gloved fist he raised on high to dot the other in the eye. Who knows what horrors might have

been, had there not come upon the scene old London city's favourite son, Policeman C. 231. 'What means this conduct? Prithee stop!' exclaimed that admirable slop. With which he placed a warning hand upon the brawler's collarband. We simply hate to tell the rest. No subject here for flippant jest. The mere remembrance of the tale has made our ink turn deadly pale. Let us be brief. Some demon sent stark madness on the well-dressed gent. He gave the constable a punch just where the latter kept his lunch. The constable said 'Well! Well! Well!' and marched him to a dungeon cell. At Vine Street Station out it came--Lord Belpher was the culprit's name. But British Justice is severe alike on pauper and on peer; with even hand she holds the scale; a thumping fine, in lieu of gaol, induced Lord B. to feel remorse and learn he mustn't punch the Force."

George's mutton chop congealed on the plate, untouched. The French fried potatoes cooled off, unnoticed. This was no time for food. Rightly indeed had he relied upon his luck. It had stood by him nobly. With this clue, all was over except getting to the nearest Free Library and consulting Burke's Peerage. He paid his bill and left the restaurant.

Ten minutes later he was drinking in the pregnant information that Belpher was the family name of the Earl of Marshmoreton, and that the present earl had one son, Percy Wilbraham Marsh, educ. Eton and

Christ Church, Oxford, and what the book with its customary curtness called "one d."--Patricia Maud. The family seat, said Burke, was Belpher Castle, Belpher, Hants.

Some hours later, seated in a first-class compartment of a train that moved slowly out of Waterloo Station, George watched London vanish behind him. In the pocket closest to his throbbing heart was a single ticket to Belpher.