CHAPTER 6.

At about the time that George Bevan's train was leaving Waterloo, a grey racing car drew up with a grinding of brakes and a sputter of gravel in front of the main entrance of Belpher Castle. The slim and elegant young man at the wheel removed his goggles, pulled out a watch, and addressed the stout young man at his side.

"Two hours and eighteen minutes from Hyde Park Corner, Boots. Not so dusty, what?"

His companion made no reply. He appeared to be plunged in thought. He, too, removed his goggles, revealing a florid and gloomy face, equipped, in addition to the usual features, with a small moustache and an extra chin. He scowled forbiddingly at the charming scene which the goggles had hidden from him.

Before him, a symmetrical mass of grey stone and green ivy, Belpher Castle towered against a light blue sky. On either side rolling park land spread as far as the eye could see, carpeted here and there with violets, dotted with great oaks and ashes and Spanish chestnuts, orderly, peaceful and English. Nearer, on his left, were rose-gardens, in the centre of which, tilted at a sharp angle, appeared the seat of a pair of corduroy trousers, whose wearer seemed to be engaged in hunting for snails. Thrushes sang in the green shrubberies; rooks cawed in the elms. Somewhere in the

distance sounded the tinkle of sheep bells and the lowing of cows. It was, in fact, a scene which, lit by the evening sun of a perfect spring day and fanned by a gentle westerly wind, should have brought balm and soothing meditations to one who was the sole heir to all this Paradise.

But Percy, Lord Belpher, remained uncomforted by the notable co-operation of Man and Nature, and drew no solace from the reflection that all these pleasant things would one day be his own. His mind was occupied at the moment, to the exclusion of all other thoughts, by the recollection of that painful scene in Bow Street Police Court. The magistrate's remarks, which had been tactless and unsympathetic, still echoed in his ears. And that infernal night in Vine Street police station . . . The darkness . . . The hard bed. . . The discordant vocalising of the drunk and disorderly in the next cell. . . . Time might soften these memories, might lessen the sharp agony of them; but nothing could remove them altogether.

Percy had been shaken to the core of his being. Physically, he was still stiff and sore from the plank bed. Mentally, he was a volcano. He had been marched up the Haymarket in the full sight of all London by a bounder of a policeman. He had been talked to like an erring child by a magistrate whom nothing could convince that he had not been under the influence of alcohol at the moment of his arrest. (The man had said things about his liver, kindly be-warned-in-time-and-pull-up-before-it-is-too-late things, which

would have seemed to Percy indecently frank if spoken by his medical adviser in the privacy of the sick chamber.) It is perhaps not to be wondered at that Belpher Castle, for all its beauty of scenery and architecture, should have left Lord Belpher a little cold. He was seething with a fury which the conversation of Reggie Byng had done nothing to allay in the course of the journey from London. Reggie was the last person he would willingly have chosen as a companion in his hour of darkness. Reggie was not soothing. He would insist on addressing him by his old Eton nickname of Boots which Percy detested. And all the way down he had been breaking out at intervals into ribald comments on the recent unfortunate occurrence which were very hard to bear.

He resumed this vein as they alighted and rang the bell.

"This," said Reggie, "is rather like a bit out of a melodrama. Convict son totters up the steps of the old home and punches the bell. What awaits him beyond? Forgiveness? Or the raspberry? True, the white-haired butler who knew him as a child will sob on his neck, but what of the old dad? How will dad take the blot of the family escutcheon?"

Lord Belpher's scowl deepened.

"It's not a joking matter," he said coldly.

"Great Heavens, I'm not joking. How could I have the heart to joke at a moment like this, when the friend of my youth has suddenly become a social leper?"

"I wish to goodness you would stop."

"Do you think it is any pleasure to me to be seen about with a man who is now known in criminal circles as Percy, the Piccadilly Policeman-Puncher? I keep a brave face before the world, but inwardly I burn with shame and agony and what not."

The great door of the castle swung open, revealing Keggs, the butler. He was a man of reverend years, portly and dignified, with a respectfully benevolent face that beamed gravely on the young master and Mr. Byng, as if their coming had filled his cup of pleasure. His light, slightly protruding eyes expressed reverential good will. He gave just that touch of cosy humanity to the scene which the hall with its half lights and massive furniture needed to make it perfect to the returned wanderer. He seemed to be intimating that this was a moment to which he had looked forward long, and that from now on quiet happiness would reign supreme. It is distressing to have to reveal the jarring fact that, in his hours of privacy when off duty, this apparently ideal servitor was so far from being a respecter of persons that he was accustomed to speak of Lord Belpher as "Percy", and even as "His Nibs". It was, indeed, an open secret among the upper servants at the castle, and

a fact hinted at with awe among the lower, that Keggs was at heart a Socialist.

"Good evening, your lordship. Good evening, sir."

Lord Belpher acknowledged the salutation with a grunt, but Reggie was more affable.

"How are you, Keggs? Now's your time, if you're going to do it." He stepped a little to one side and indicated Lord Belpher's crimson neck with an inviting gesture.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Ah. You'd rather wait till you can do it a little more privately. Perhaps you're right."

The butler smiled indulgently. He did not understand what Reggie was talking about, but that did not worry him. He had long since come to the conclusion that Reggie was slightly mad, a theory supported by the latter's valet, who was of the same opinion. Keggs did not dislike Reggie, but intellectually he considered him negligible.

"Send something to drink into the library, Keggs," said Lord Belpher.

"Very good, your lordship."

"A topping idea," said Reggie. "I'll just take the old car round to the garage, and then I'll be with you."

He climbed to the steering wheel, and started the engine. Lord Belpher proceeded to the library, while Keggs melted away through the green baize door at the end of the hall which divided the servants' quarters from the rest of the house.

Reggie had hardly driven a dozen yards when he perceived his stepmother and Lord Marshmoreton coming towards him from the direction of the rose-garden. He drew up to greet them.

"Hullo, mater. What ho, uncle! Back again at the old homestead, what?"

Beneath Lady Caroline's aristocratic front agitation seemed to lurk.

"Reggie, where is Percy?"

"Old Boots? I think he's gone to the library. I just decanted him out of the car."

Lady Caroline turned to her brother.

"Let us go to the library, John."

"All right. All right. All right," said Lord Marshmoreton irritably. Something appeared to have ruffled his calm.

Reggie drove on. As he was strolling back after putting the car away he met Maud.

"Hullo, Maud, dear old thing."

"Why, hullo, Reggie. I was expecting you back last night."

"Couldn't get back last night. Had to stick in town and rally round old Boots. Couldn't desert the old boy in his hour of trial." Reggie chuckled amusedly. "'Hour of trial,' is rather good, what? What I mean to say is, that's just what it was, don't you know."

"Why, what happened to Percy?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't heard? Of course not. It wouldn't have been in the morning papers. Why, Percy punched a policeman."

"Percy did what?"

"Slugged a slop. Most dramatic thing. Sloshed him in the midriff. Absolutely. The cross marks the spot where the tragedy occurred."

Maud caught her breath. Somehow, though she could not trace the connection, she felt that this extraordinary happening must be linked up with her escapade. Then her sense of humour got the better of apprehension. Her eyes twinkled delightedly.

"You don't mean to say Percy did that?"

"Absolutely. The human tiger, and what not. Menace to Society and all that sort of thing. No holding him. For some unexplained reason the generous blood of the Belphers boiled over, and then--zing. They jerked him off to Vine Street. Like the poem, don't you know. 'And poor old Percy walked between with gyves upon his wrists.' And this morning, bright and early, the beak parted him from ten quid. You know, Maud, old thing, our duty stares us plainly in the eyeball. We've got to train old Boots down to a reasonable weight and spring him on the National Sporting Club. We've been letting a champion middleweight blush unseen under our very roof tree."

Maud hesitated a moment.

"I suppose you don't know," she asked carelessly, "why he did it? I mean, did he tell you anything?"

"Couldn't get a word out of him. Oysters garrulous and tombs chatty in comparison. Absolutely. All I know is that he popped one into the officer's waistband. What led up to it is more than I can tell you. How would it be to stagger to the library and join the post-mortem?"

"The post-mortem?"

"Well, I met the mater and his lordship on their way to the library, and it looked to me very much as if the mater must have got hold of an evening paper on her journey from town. When did she arrive?"

"Only a short while ago."

"Then that's what's happened. She would have bought an evening paper to read in the train. By Jove, I wonder if she got hold of the one that had the poem about it. One chappie was so carried away by the beauty of the episode that he treated it in verse. I think we ought to look in and see what's happening."

Maud hesitated again. But she was a girl of spirit. And she had an intuition that her best defence would be attack. Bluff was what was needed. Wide-eyed, innocent wonder . . . After all, Percy couldn't be certain he had seen her in Piccadilly.

"All right."

"By the way, dear old girl," inquired Reggie, "did your little business come out satisfactorily? I forgot to ask."

"Not very. But it was awfully sweet of you to take me into town."

"How would it be," said Reggie nervously, "not to dwell too much on that part of it? What I mean to say is, for heaven's sake don't let the mater know I rallied round."

"Don't worry," said Maud with a laugh. "I'm not going to talk about the thing at all."

Lord Belpher, meanwhile, in the library, had begun with the aid of a whisky and soda to feel a little better. There was something about the library with its sombre half tones that soothed his bruised spirit. The room held something of the peace of a deserted city. The world, with its violent adventures and tall policemen, did not enter here. There was balm in those rows and rows of books which nobody ever read, those vast writing tables at which nobody ever wrote. From the broad mantel-piece the bust of some unnamed ancient looked down almost sympathetically. Something remotely resembling peace had begun to steal into Percy's soul, when it was expelled by the abrupt opening of the door and the entry of Lady Caroline Byng and his father. One glance at the face of the former

was enough to tell Lord Belpher that she knew all.

He rose defensively.

"Let me explain."

Lady Caroline quivered with repressed emotion. This masterly woman had not lost control of herself, but her aristocratic calm had seldom been so severely tested. As Reggie had surmised, she had read the report of the proceedings in the evening paper in the train, and her world had been reeling ever since. Caesar, stabbed by Brutus, could scarcely have experienced a greater shock. The other members of her family had disappointed her often. She had become inured to the spectacle of her brother working in the garden in corduroy trousers and in other ways behaving in a manner beneath the dignity of an Earl of Marshmoreton. She had resigned herself to the innate flaw in the character of Maud which had allowed her to fall in love with a nobody whom she had met without an introduction. Even Reggie had exhibited at times democratic traits of which she thoroughly disapproved. But of her nephew Percy she had always been sure. He was solid rock. He, at least, she had always felt, would never do anything to injure the family prestige. And now, so to speak, "Lo, Ben Adhem's name led all the rest." In other words, Percy was the worst of the lot. Whatever indiscretions the rest had committed, at least they had never got the family into the comic columns of the evening papers. Lord Marshmoreton might wear corduroy trousers and

refuse to entertain the County at garden parties and go to bed with a book when it was his duty to act as host at a formal ball; Maud might give her heart to an impossible person whom nobody had ever heard of; and Reggie might be seen at fashionable restaurants with pugilists; but at any rate evening paper poets had never written facetious verses about their exploits. This crowning degradation had been reserved for the hitherto blameless Percy, who, of all the young men of Lady Caroline's acquaintance, had till now appeared to have the most scrupulous sense of his position, the most rigid regard for the dignity of his great name. Yet, here he was, if the carefully considered reports in the daily press were to be believed, spending his time in the very spring-tide of his life running about London like a frenzied Hottentot, brutally assaulting the police. Lady Caroline felt as a bishop might feel if he suddenly discovered that some favourite curate had gone over to the worship of Mumbo Jumbo.

"Explain?" she cried. "How can you explain? You--my nephew, the heir to the title, behaving like a common rowdy in the streets of London . . . your name in the papers . . . "

"If you knew the circumstances."

"The circumstances? They are in the evening paper. They are in print."

"In verse," added Lord Marshmoreton. He chuckled amiably at the recollection. He was an easily amused man. "You ought to read it, my boy. Some of it was capital . . ."

"John!"

"But deplorable, of course," added Lord Marshmoreton hastily. "Very deplorable." He endeavoured to regain his sister's esteem by a show of righteous indignation. "What do you mean by it, damn it? You're my only son. I have watched you grow from child to boy, from boy to man, with tender solicitude. I have wanted to be proud of you. And all the time, dash it, you are prowling about London like a lion, seeking whom you may devour, terrorising the metropolis, putting harmless policemen in fear of their lives. . ."

"Will you listen to me for a moment?" shouted Percy. He began to speak rapidly, as one conscious of the necessity of saying his say while the saying was good. "The facts are these. I was walking along Piccadilly on my way to lunch at the club, when, near Burlington Arcade, I was amazed to see Maud."

Lady Caroline uttered an exclamation.

"Maud? But Maud was here."

"I can't understand it," went on Lord Marshmoreton, pursuing his

remarks. Righteous indignation had, he felt, gone well. It might be judicious to continue in that vein, though privately he held the opinion that nothing in Percy's life so became him as this assault on the Force. Lord Marshmoreton, who in his time had committed all the follies of youth, had come to look on his blameless son as scarcely human. "It's not as if you were wild. You've never got into any scrapes at Oxford. You've spent your time collecting old china and prayer rugs. You wear flannel next your skin . . ."

"Will you please be quiet," said Lady Caroline impatiently. "Go on, Percy."

"Oh, very well," said Lord Marshmoreton. "I only spoke. I merely made a remark."

"You say you saw Maud in Piccadilly, Percy?"

"Precisely. I was on the point of putting it down to an extraordinary resemblance, when suddenly she got into a cab. Then I knew."

Lord Marshmoreton could not permit this to pass in silence. He was a fair-minded man.

"Why shouldn't the girl have got into a cab? Why must a girl walking along Piccadilly be my daughter Maud just because she got into a cab. London," he proceeded, warming to the argument and

thrilled by the clearness and coherence of his reasoning, "is full of girls who take cabs."

"She didn't take a cab."

"You just said she did," said Lord Marshmoreton cleverly.

"I said she got into a cab. There was somebody else already in the cab. A man. Aunt Caroline, it was the man."

"Good gracious," ejaculated Lady Caroline, falling into a chair as if she had been hamstrung.

"I am absolutely convinced of it," proceeded Lord Belpher solemnly. "His behaviour was enough to confirm my suspicions. The cab had stopped in a block of the traffic, and I went up and requested him in a perfectly civil manner to allow me to look at the lady who had just got in. He denied that there was a lady in the cab. And I had seen her jump in with my own eyes. Throughout the conversation he was leaning out of the window with the obvious intention of screening whoever was inside from my view. I followed him along Piccadilly in another cab, and tracked him to the Carlton. When I arrived there he was standing on the pavement outside. There were no signs of Maud. I demanded that he tell me her whereabouts. . ."

"That reminds me," said Lord Marshmoreton cheerfully, "of a story I

read in one of the papers. I daresay it's old. Stop me if you've heard it. A woman says to the maid: 'Do you know anything of my husband's whereabouts?' And the maid replies--"

"Do be quiet," snapped Lady Caroline. "I should have thought that you would be interested in a matter affecting the vital welfare of your only daughter."

"I am. I am," said Lord Marshmoreton hastily. "The maid replied: 'They're at the wash.' Of course I am. Go on, Percy. Good God, boy, don't take all day telling us your story."

"At that moment the fool of a policeman came up and wanted to know what the matter was. I lost my head. I admit it freely. The policeman grasped my shoulder, and I struck him."

"Where?" asked Lord Marshmoreton, a stickler for detail.

"What does that matter?" demanded Lady Caroline. "You did quite right, Percy. These insolent jacks in office ought not to be allowed to manhandle people. Tell me, what this man was like?"

"Extremely ordinary-looking. In fact, all I can remember about him was that he was clean-shaven. I cannot understand how Maud could have come to lose her head over such a man. He seemed to me to have no attraction whatever," said Lord Belpher, a little

unreasonably, for Apollo himself would hardly appear attractive when knocking one's best hat off.

"It must have been the same man."

"Precisely. If we wanted further proof, he was an American. You recollect that we heard that the man in Wales was American."

There was a portentous silence. Percy stared at the floor. Lady Caroline breathed deeply. Lord Marshmoreton, feeling that something was expected of him, said "Good Gad!" and gazed seriously at a stuffed owl on a bracket. Maud and Reggie Byng came in.

"What ho, what ho, what ho!" said Reggie breezily. He always believed in starting a conversation well, and putting people at their ease. "What ho! What ho!"

Maud braced herself for the encounter.

"Hullo, Percy, dear," she said, meeting her brother's accusing eye with the perfect composure that comes only from a thoroughly guilty conscience. "What's all this I hear about your being the Scourge of London? Reggie says that policemen dive down manholes when they see you coming."

The chill in the air would have daunted a less courageous girl.

Lady Caroline had risen, and was staring sternly. Percy was pulling the puffs of an overwrought soul. Lord Marshmoreton, whose thoughts had wandered off to the rose garden, pulled himself together and tried to look menacing. Maud went on without waiting for a reply. She was all bubbling gaiety and insouciance, a charming picture of young English girlhood that nearly made her brother foam at the mouth.

"Father dear," she said, attaching herself affectionately to his buttonhole, "I went round the links in eighty-three this morning. I did the long hole in four. One under par, a thing I've never done before in my life." ("Bless my soul," said Lord Marshmoreton weakly, as, with an apprehensive eye on his sister, he patted his daughter's shoulder.) "First, I sent a screecher of a drive right down the middle of the fairway. Then I took my brassey and put the ball just on the edge of the green. A hundred and eighty yards if it was an inch. My approach putt--"

Lady Caroline, who was no devotee of the royal and ancient game, interrupted the recital.

"Never mind what you did this morning. What did you do yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes," said Lord Belpher. "Where were you yesterday afternoon?"

Maud's gaze was the gaze of a young child who has never even attempted to put anything over in all its little life.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"What were you doing in Piccadilly yesterday afternoon?" said Lady Caroline.

"Piccadilly? The place where Percy fights policemen? I don't understand."

Lady Caroline was no sportsman. She put one of those direct questions, capable of being answered only by "Yes" or "No", which ought not to be allowed in controversy. They are the verbal equivalent of shooting a sitting bird.

"Did you or did you not go to London yesterday, Maud?"

The monstrous unfairness of this method of attack pained Maud. From childhood up she had held the customary feminine views upon the Lie Direct. As long as it was a question of suppression of the true or suggestion of the false she had no scruples. But she had a distaste for deliberate falsehood. Faced now with a choice between two evils, she chose the one which would at least leave her self-respect.

"Yes, I did."

Lady Caroline looked at Lord Belpher. Lord Belpher looked at Lady Caroline.

"You went to meet that American of yours?"

Reggie Byng slid softly from the room. He felt that he would be happier elsewhere. He had been an acutely embarrassed spectator of this distressing scene, and had been passing the time by shuffling his feet, playing with his coat buttons and perspiring.

"Don't go, Reggie," said Lord Belpher.

"Well, what I mean to say is--family row and what not--if you see what I mean--I've one or two things I ought to do--"

He vanished. Lord Belpher frowned a sombre frown. "Then it was that man who knocked my hat off?"

"What do you mean?" said Lady Caroline. "Knocked your hat off? You never told me he knocked your hat off."

"It was when I was asking him to let me look inside the cab. I had grasped the handle of the door, when he suddenly struck my hat, causing it to fly off. And, while I was picking it up, he drove

away."

"C'k," exploded Lord Marshmoreton. "C'k, c'k, c'k." He twisted his face by a supreme exertion of will power into a mask of indignation. "You ought to have had the scoundrel arrested," he said vehemently. "It was a technical assault."

"The man who knocked your hat off, Percy," said Maud, "was not . . . He was a different man altogether. A stranger."

"As if you would be in a cab with a stranger," said Lady Caroline caustically. "There are limits, I hope, to even your indiscretions."

Lord Marshmoreton cleared his throat. He was sorry for Maud, whom he loved.

"Now, looking at the matter broadly--"

"Be quiet," said Lady Caroline.

Lord Marshmoreton subsided.

"I wanted to avoid you," said Maud, "so I jumped into the first cab I saw."

"I don't believe it," said Percy.

"It's the truth."

"You are simply trying to put us off the scent."

Lady Caroline turned to Maud. Her manner was plaintive. She looked like a martyr at the stake who deprecatingly lodges a timid complaint, fearful the while lest she may be hurting the feelings of her persecutors by appearing even for a moment out of sympathy with their activities.

"My dear child, why will you not be reasonable in this matter? Why will you not let yourself be guided by those who are older and wiser than you?"

"Exactly," said Lord Belpher.

"The whole thing is too absurd."

"Precisely," said Lord Belpher.

Lady Caroline turned on him irritably.

"Please do not interrupt, Percy. Now, you've made me forget what I was going to say."

"To my mind," said Lord Marshmoreton, coming to the surface once more, "the proper attitude to adopt on occasions like the present--"

"Please," said Lady Caroline.

Lord Marshmoreton stopped, and resumed his silent communion with the stuffed bird.

"You can't stop yourself being in love, Aunt Caroline," said Maud.

"You can be stopped if you've somebody with a level head looking after you."

Lord Marshmoreton tore himself away from the bird.

"Why, when I was at Oxford in the year '87," he said chattily, "I fancied myself in love with the female assistant at a tobacconist shop. Desperately in love, dammit. Wanted to marry her. I recollect my poor father took me away from Oxford and kept me here at Belpher under lock and key. Lock and key, dammit. I was deucedly upset at the time, I remember." His mind wandered off into the glorious past. "I wonder what that girl's name was. Odd one can't remember names. She had chestnut hair and a mole on the side of her chin. I used to kiss it, I recollect--"

Lady Caroline, usually such an advocate of her brother's researches

into the family history, cut the reminiscences short.

"Never mind that now."

"I don't. I got over it. That's the moral."

"Well," said Lady Caroline, "at any rate poor father acted with great good sense on that occasion. There seems nothing to do but to treat Maud in just the same way. You shall not stir a step from the castle till you have got over this dreadful infatuation. You will be watched."

"I shall watch you," said Lord Belpher solemnly, "I shall watch your every movement."

A dreamy look came into Maud's brown eyes.

"Stone walls do not a prison make nor iron bars a cage," she said softly.

"That wasn't your experience, Percy, my boy," said Lord Marshmoreton.

"They make a very good imitation," said Lady Caroline coldly, ignoring the interruption.

Maud faced her defiantly. She looked like a princess in captivity facing her gaolers.

"I don't care. I love him, and I always shall love him, and nothing is ever going to stop me loving him--because I love him," she concluded a little lamely.

"Nonsense," said Lady Caroline. "In a year from now you will have forgotten his name. Don't you agree with me, Percy?"

"Quite," said Lord Belpher.

"I shan't."

"Deuced hard things to remember, names," said Lord Marshmoreton. "If I've tried once to remember that tobacconist girl's name, I've tried a hundred times. I have an idea it began with an 'L.' Muriel or Hilda or something."

"Within a year," said Lady Caroline, "you will be wondering how you ever came to be so foolish. Don't you think so, Percy?"

"Quite," said Lord Belpher.

Lord Marshmoreton turned on him irritably.

"Good God, boy, can't you answer a simple question with a plain affirmative? What do you mean--quite? If somebody came to me and pointed you out and said, 'Is that your son?' do you suppose I should say 'Quite?' I wish the devil you didn't collect prayer rugs. It's sapped your brain."

"They say prison life often weakens the intellect, father," said Maud. She moved towards the door and turned the handle. Albert, the page boy, who had been courting earache by listening at the keyhole, straightened his small body and scuttled away. "Well, is that all, Aunt Caroline? May I go now?"

"Certainly. I have said all I wished to say."

"Very well. I'm sorry to disobey you, but I can't help it."

"You'll find you can help it after you've been cooped up here for a few more months," said Percy.

A gentle smile played over Maud's face.

"Love laughs at locksmiths," she murmured softly, and passed from the room.

"What did she say?" asked Lord Marshmoreton, interested. "Something about somebody laughing at a locksmith? I don't

understand. Why should anyone laugh at locksmiths? Most respectable men. Had one up here only the day before yesterday, forcing open the drawer of my desk. Watched him do it. Most interesting. He smelt rather strongly of a damned bad brand of tobacco. Fellow must have a throat of leather to be able to smoke the stuff. But he didn't strike me as an object of derision. From first to last, I was never tempted to laugh once."

Lord Belpher wandered moodily to the window and looked out into the gathering darkness.

"And this has to happen," he said bitterly, "on the eve of my twenty-first birthday."