## CHAPTER 7.

The first requisite of an invading army is a base. George, having entered Belpher village and thus accomplished the first stage in his foreward movement on the castle, selected as his base the Marshmoreton Arms. Selected is perhaps hardly the right word, as it implies choice, and in George's case there was no choice. There are two inns at Belpher, but the Marshmoreton Arms is the only one that offers accommodation for man and beast, assuming--that is to say--that the man and beast desire to spend the night. The other house, the Blue Boar, is a mere beerhouse, where the lower strata of Belpher society gather of a night to quench their thirst and to tell one another interminable stories without any point whatsoever. But the Marshmoreton Arms is a comfortable, respectable hostelry, catering for the village plutocrats. There of an evening you will find the local veterinary surgeon smoking a pipe with the grocer, the baker, and the butcher, with perhaps a sprinkling of neighbouring farmers to help the conversation along. There is a "shilling ordinary"--which is rural English for a cut off the joint and a boiled potato, followed by hunks of the sort of cheese which believes that it pays to advertise, and this is usually well attended. On the other days of the week, until late in the evening, however, the visitor to the Marshmoreton Arms has the place almost entirely to himself.

It is to be questioned whether in the whole length and breadth of

the world there is a more admirable spot for a man in love to pass a day or two than the typical English village. The Rocky Mountains, that traditional stamping-ground for the heartbroken, may be well enough in their way; but a lover has to be cast in a pretty stem mould to be able to be introspective when at any moment he may meet an annoyed cinnamon bear. In the English village there are no such obstacles to meditation. It combines the comforts of civilization with the restfulness of solitude in a manner equalled by no other spot except the New York Public Library. Here your lover may wander to and fro unmolested, speaking to nobody, by nobody addressed, and have the satisfaction at the end of the day of sitting down to a capitally cooked chop and chips, lubricated by golden English ale.

Belpher, in addition to all the advantages of the usual village, has a quiet charm all its own, due to the fact that it has seen better days. In a sense, it is a ruin, and ruins are always soothing to the bruised soul. Ten years before, Belpher had been a flourishing centre of the South of England oyster trade. It is situated by the shore, where Hayling Island, lying athwart the mouth of the bay, forms the waters into a sort of brackish lagoon, in much the same way as Fire Island shuts off the Great South Bay of Long Island from the waves of the Atlantic. The water of Belpher Creek is shallow even at high tide, and when the tide runs out it leaves glistening mud flats, which it is the peculiar taste of the oyster to prefer to any other habitation. For years Belpher oysters had been the mainstay of gay supper parties at the Savoy, the

Carlton and Romano's. Dukes doted on them; chorus girls wept if they were not on the bill of fare. And then, in an evil hour, somebody discovered that what made the Belpher Oyster so particularly plump and succulent was the fact that it breakfasted, lunched and dined almost entirely on the local sewage. There is but a thin line ever between popular homage and execration. We see it in the case of politicians, generals and prize-fighters; and oysters are no exception to the rule. There was a typhoid scare--quite a passing and unjustified scare, but strong enough to do its deadly work; and almost overnight Belpher passed from a place of flourishing industry to the sleepy, by-the-world-forgotten spot which it was when George Bevan discovered it. The shallow water is still there; the mud is still there; even the oyster-beds are still there; but not the oysters nor the little world of activity which had sprung up around them. The glory of Belpher is dead; and over its gates Ichabod is written. But, if it has lost in importance, it has gained in charm; and George, for one, had no regrets. To him, in his present state of mental upheaval, Belpher was the ideal spot.

It was not at first that George roused himself to the point of asking why he was here and what--now that he was here--he proposed to do. For two languorous days he loafed, sufficiently occupied with his thoughts. He smoked long, peaceful pipes in the stable-yard, watching the ostlers as they groomed the horses; he played with the Inn puppy, bestowed respectful caresses on the Inn

cat. He walked down the quaint cobbled street to the harbour, sauntered along the shore, and lay on his back on the little beach at the other side of the lagoon, from where he could see the red roofs of the village, while the imitation waves splashed busily on the stones, trying to conceal with bustle and energy the fact that the water even two hundred yards from the shore was only eighteen inches deep. For it is the abiding hope of Belpher Creek that it may be able to deceive the occasional visitor into mistaking it for the open sea.

And presently the tide would ebb. The waste of waters became a sea of mud, cheerfully covered as to much of its surface with green grasses. The evening sun struck rainbow colours from the moist softness. Birds sang in the thickets. And George, heaving himself up, walked back to the friendly cosiness of the Marshmoreton Arms. And the remarkable part of it was that everything seemed perfectly natural and sensible to him, nor had he any particular feeling that in falling in love with Lady Maud Marsh and pursuing her to Belpher he had set himself anything in the nature of a hopeless task. Like one kissed by a goddess in a dream, he walked on air; and, while one is walking on air, it is easy to overlook the boulders in the path.

Consider his position, you faint-hearted and self-pitying young men who think you have a tough row to hoe just because, when you pay your evening visit with the pound box of candy under your arm, you

see the handsome sophomore from Yale sitting beside her on the porch, playing the ukulele. If ever the world has turned black to you in such a situation and the moon gone in behind a cloud, think of George Bevan and what he was up against. You are at least on the spot. You can at least put up a fight. If there are ukuleles in the world, there are also guitars, and tomorrow it may be you and not he who sits on the moonlit porch; it may be he and not you who arrives late. Who knows? Tomorrow he may not show up till you have finished the Bedouin's Love Song and are annoying the local birds, roosting in the trees, with Poor Butterfly.

What I mean to say is, you are on the map. You have a sporting chance. Whereas George... Well, just go over to England and try wooing an earl's daughter whom you have only met once--and then without an introduction; whose brother's hat you have smashed beyond repair; whose family wishes her to marry some other man: who wants to marry some other man herself--and not the same other man, but another other man; who is closely immured in a mediaeval castle . . . Well, all I say is--try it. And then go back to your porch with a chastened spirit and admit that you might be a whole lot worse off.

George, as I say, had not envisaged the peculiar difficulties of his position. Nor did he until the evening of his second day at the Marshmoreton Arms. Until then, as I have indicated, he roamed in a golden mist of dreamy meditation among the soothing by-ways of the

village of Belpher. But after lunch on the second day it came upon him that all this sort of thing was pleasant but not practical. Action was what was needed. Action.

The first, the obvious move was to locate the castle. Inquiries at the Marshmoreton Arms elicited the fact that it was "a step" up the road that ran past the front door of the inn. But this wasn't the day of the week when the general public was admitted. The sightseer could invade Belpher Castle on Thursdays only, between the hours of two and four. On other days of the week all he could do was to stand like Moses on Pisgah and take in the general effect from a distance. As this was all that George had hoped to be able to do, he set forth.

It speedily became evident to George that "a step" was a euphemism. Five miles did he tramp before, trudging wearily up a winding lane, he came out on a breeze-swept hill-top, and saw below him, nestling in its trees, what was now for him the centre of the world. He sat on a stone wail and lit a pipe. Belpher Castle. Maud's home. There it was. And now what?

The first thought that came to him was practical, even prosaic--the thought that he couldn't possibly do this five-miles-there and-five-miles-back walk, every time he wanted to see the place. He must shift his base nearer the scene of operations. One of those trim, thatched cottages down there in the valley would be just the

thing, if he could arrange to take possession of it. They sat there all round the castle, singly and in groups, like small dogs round their master. They looked as if they had been there for centuries. Probably they had, as they were made of stone as solid as that of the castle. There must have been a time, thought George, when the castle was the central rallying-point for all those scattered homes; when rumour of danger from marauders had sent all that little community scuttling for safety to the sheltering walls.

For the first time since he had set out on his expedition, a certain chill, a discomforting sinking of the heart, afflicted George as he gazed down at the grim grey fortress which he had undertaken to storm. So must have felt those marauders of old when they climbed to the top of this very hill to spy out the land. And George's case was even worse than theirs. They could at least hope that a strong arm and a stout heart would carry them past those solid walls; they had not to think of social etiquette. Whereas George was so situated that an unsympathetic butler could put him to rout by refusing him admittance.

The evening was drawing in. Already, in the brief time he had spent on the hill-top, the sky had turned from blue to saffron and from saffron to grey. The plaintive voices of homing cows floated up to him from the valley below. A bat had left its shelter and was wheeling around him, a sinister blot against the sky. A sickle moon gleamed over the trees. George felt cold. He turned. The shadows

of night wrapped him round, and little things in the hedgerows chirped and chittered mockery at him as he stumbled down the lane.

George's request for a lonely furnished cottage somewhere in the neighbourhood of the castle did not, as he had feared, strike the Belpher house-agent as the demand of a lunatic. Every well-dressed stranger who comes to Belpher is automatically set down by the natives as an artist, for the picturesqueness of the place has caused it to be much infested by the brothers and sisters of the brush. In asking for a cottage, indeed, George did precisely as Belpher society expected him to do; and the agent was reaching for his list almost before the words were out of his mouth. In less than half an hour George was out in the street again, the owner for the season of what the agent described as a "gem" and the employer of a farmer's wife who lived near-by and would, as was her custom with artists, come in the morning and evening to "do" for him. The interview would have taken but a few minutes, had it not been prolonged by the chattiness of the agent on the subject of the occupants of the castle, to which George listened attentively. He was not greatly encouraged by what he heard of Lord Marshmoreton. The earl had made himself notably unpopular in the village recently by his firm--the house-agent said "pig-headed"--attitude in respect to a certain dispute about a right-of-way. It was Lady Caroline, and not the easy-going peer, who was really to blame in the matter; but the impression that George got from the house-agent's description of Lord Marshmoreton was that the latter was a sort of

Nero, possessing, in addition to the qualities of a Roman tyrant, many of the least lovable traits of the ghila monster of Arizona. Hearing this about her father, and having already had the privilege of meeting her brother and studying him at first hand, his heart bled for Maud. It seemed to him that existence at the castle in such society must be little short of torture.

"I must do something," he muttered. "I must do something quick."

"Beg pardon," said the house-agent.

"Nothing," said George. "Well, I'll take that cottage. I'd better write you a cheque for the first month's rent now."

So George took up his abode, full of strenuous--if vague--purpose, in the plainly-furnished but not uncomfortable cottage known locally as "the one down by Platt's." He might have found a worse billet. It was a two-storied building of stained red brick, not one of the thatched nests on which he had looked down from the hill. Those were not for rent, being occupied by families whose ancestors had occupied them for generations back. The one down by Platt's was a more modern structure--a speculation, in fact, of the farmer whose wife came to "do" for George, and designed especially to accommodate the stranger who had the desire and the money to rent it. It so departed from type that it possessed a small but undeniable bath-room. Besides this miracle, there was a cosy

sitting-room, a larger bedroom on the floor above and next to this an empty room facing north, which had evidently served artist occupants as a studio. The remainder of the ground floor was taken up by kitchen and scullery. The furniture had been constructed by somebody who would probably have done very well if he had taken up some other line of industry; but it was mitigated by a very fine and comfortable wicker easy chair, left there by one of last year's artists; and other artists had helped along the good work by relieving the plainness of the walls with a landscape or two. In fact, when George had removed from the room two antimacassars, three group photographs of the farmer's relations, an illuminated text, and a china statuette of the Infant Samuel, and stacked them in a corner of the empty studio, the place became almost a home from home.

Solitude can be very unsolitary if a man is in love. George never even began to be bored. The only thing that in any way troubled his peace was the thought that he was not accomplishing a great deal in the matter of helping Maud out of whatever trouble it was that had befallen her. The most he could do was to prowl about roads near the castle in the hope of an accidental meeting. And such was his good fortune that, on the fourth day of his vigil, the accidental meeting occurred.

Taking his morning prowl along the lanes, he was rewarded by the sight of a grey racing-car at the side of the road. It was empty,

but from underneath it protruded a pair of long legs, while beside it stood a girl, at the sight of whom George's heart began to thump so violently that the long-legged one might have been pardoned had he supposed that his engine had started again of its own volition.

Until he spoke the soft grass had kept her from hearing his approach. He stopped close behind her, and cleared his throat. She started and turned, and their eyes met.

For a moment hers were empty of any recognition. Then they lit up. She caught her breath quickly, and a faint flush came into her face.

"Can I help you?" asked George.

The long legs wriggled out into the road followed by a long body. The young man under the car sat up, turning a grease-streaked and pleasant face to George.

"Eh, what?"

"Can I help you? I know how to fix a car."

The young man beamed in friendly fashion.

"It's awfully good of you, old chap, but so do I. It's the only

thing I can do well. Thanks very much and so forth all the same."

George fastened his eyes on the girl's. She had not spoken.

"If there is anything in the world I can possibly do for you," he said slowly, "I hope you will let me know. I should like above all things to help you."

The girl spoke.

"Thank you," she said in a low voice almost inaudible.

George walked away. The grease-streaked young man followed him with his gaze.

"Civil cove, that," he said. "Rather gushing though, what? American, wasn't he?"

"Yes. I think he was."

"Americans are the civillest coves I ever struck. I remember asking the way of a chappie at Baltimore a couple of years ago when I was there in my yacht, and he followed me for miles, shrieking advice and encouragement. I thought it deuced civil of him."

"I wish you would hurry up and get the car right, Reggie. We shall

be awfully late for lunch."

Reggie Byng began to slide backwards under the car.

"All right, dear heart. Rely on me. It's something quite simple."

"Well, do be quick."

"Imitation of greased lightning--very difficult," said Reggie encouragingly. "Be patient. Try and amuse yourself somehow. Ask yourself a riddle. Tell yourself a few anecdotes. I'll be with you in a moment. I say, I wonder what the cove is doing at Belpher? Deuced civil cove," said Reggie approvingly. "I liked him. And now, business of repairing breakdown."

His smiling face vanished under the car like the Cheshire cat. Maud stood looking thoughtfully down the road in the direction in which George had disappeared.