

## CHAPTER 9.

While George and Billie Dore wandered to the rose garden to interview the man in corduroys, Maud had been seated not a hundred yards away--in a very special haunt of her own, a cracked stucco temple set up in the days of the Regency on the shores of a little lily-covered pond. She was reading poetry to Albert the page.

Albert the page was a recent addition to Maud's inner circle. She had interested herself in him some two months back in much the same spirit as the prisoner in his dungeon cell tames and pets the conventional mouse. To educate Albert, to raise him above his groove in life and develop his soul, appealed to her romantic nature as a worthy task, and as a good way of filling in the time. It is an exceedingly moot point--and one which his associates of the servants' hall would have combated hotly--whether Albert possessed a soul. The most one could say for certain is that he looked as if he possessed one. To one who saw his deep blue eyes and their sweet, pensive expression as they searched the middle distance he seemed like a young angel. How was the watcher to know that the thought behind that far-off gaze was simply a speculation as to whether the bird on the cedar tree was or was not within range of his catapult? Certainly Maud had no such suspicion. She worked hopefully day by day to rouse Albert to an appreciation of the nobler things of life.

Not but what it was tough going. Even she admitted that. Albert's soul did not soar readily. It refused to leap from the earth. His reception of the poem she was reading could scarcely have been called encouraging. Maud finished it in a hushed voice, and looked pensively across the dappled water of the pool. A gentle breeze stirred the water-lilies, so that they seemed to sigh.

"Isn't that beautiful, Albert?" she said.

Albert's blue eyes lit up. His lips parted eagerly,

"That's the first hornet I seen this year," he said pointing.

Maud felt a little damped.

"Haven't you been listening, Albert?"

"Oh, yes, m'lady! Ain't he a wopper, too?"

"Never mind the hornet, Albert."

"Very good, m'lady."

"I wish you wouldn't say 'Very good, m'lady'. It's like--like--"

She paused. She had been about to say that it was like a butler, but, she reflected regretfully, it was probably Albert's dearest

ambition to be like a butler. "It doesn't sound right. Just say 'Yes'."

"Yes, m'lady."

Maud was not enthusiastic about the 'M'lady', but she let it go. After all, she had not quite settled in her own mind what exactly she wished Albert's attitude towards herself to be. Broadly speaking, she wanted him to be as like as he could to a medieval page, one of those silk-and-satined little treasures she had read about in the *Ingoldsby Legends*. And, of course, they presumably said 'my lady'. And yet--she felt--not for the first time--that it is not easy, to revive the Middle Ages in these curious days. Pages, like other things, seem to have changed since then.

"That poem was written by a very clever man who married one of my ancestresses. He ran away with her from this very castle in the seventeenth century."

"Lor", said Albert as a concession, but he was still interested in the hornet.

"He was far below her in the eyes of the world, but she knew what a wonderful man he was, so she didn't mind what people said about her marrying beneath her."

"Like Susan when she married the pleeceman."

"Who was Susan?"

"Red-'eaded gel that used to be cook 'ere. Mr. Keggs says to 'er, 'e says, 'You're marrying beneath you, Susan', 'e says. I 'eard 'im. I was listenin' at the door. And she says to 'im, she says, 'Oh, go and boil your fat 'ead', she says."

This translation of a favourite romance into terms of the servants' hall chilled Maud like a cold shower. She recoiled from it.

"Wouldn't you like to get a good education, Albert," she said perseveringly, "and become a great poet and write wonderful poems?"

Albert considered the point, and shook his head.

"No, m'lady."

It was discouraging. But Maud was a girl of pluck. You cannot leap into strange cabs in Piccadilly unless you have pluck. She picked up another book from the stone seat.

"Read me some of this," she said, "and then tell me if it doesn't make you feel you want to do big things."

Albert took the book cautiously. He was getting a little fed up with all this sort of thing. True, 'er ladyship gave him chocolates to eat during these sessions, but for all that it was too much like school for his taste. He regarded the open page with disfavour.

"Go on," said Maud, closing her eyes. "It's very beautiful."

Albert began. He had a husky voice, due, it is to be feared, to precocious cigarette smoking, and his enunciation was not as good as it might have been.

"Wiv' blekest morss the flower-ports  
Was-I mean were-crusted one and orl;  
Ther rusted nils fell from the knorts  
That 'eld the pear to the garden-worll.  
Ther broken sheds looked sed and stringe;  
Unlifted was the clinking latch;  
Weeded and worn their ancient thatch  
Er-pon ther lownely moated gringe,  
She only said 'Me life is dreary,  
'E cometh not,' she said."

Albert rather liked this part. He was never happy in narrative unless it could be sprinkled with a plentiful supply of "he said's" and "she said's." He finished with some gusto.

"She said - I am weary, weary,  
I would that I was dead."

Maud had listened to this rendition of one of her most adored poems with much the same feeling which a composer with an over-sensitive ear would suffer on hearing his pet opus assassinated by a schoolgirl. Albert, who was a willing lad and prepared, if such should be her desire, to plough his way through the entire seven stanzas, began the second verse, but Maud gently took the book away from him. Enough was sufficient.

"Now, wouldn't you like to be able to write a wonderful thing like that, Albert?"

"Not me, m'lady."

"You wouldn't like to be a poet when you grow up?"

Albert shook his golden head.

"I want to be a butcher when I grow up, m'lady."

Maud uttered a little cry.

"A butcher?"

"Yus, m'lady. Butchers earn good money," he said, a light of enthusiasm in his blue eyes, for he was now on his favourite subject. "You've got to 'ave meat, yer see, m'lady. It ain't like poetry, m'lady, which no one wants."

"But, Albert," cried Maud faintly. "Killing poor animals. Surely you wouldn't like that?"

Albert's eyes glowed softly, as might an acolyte's at the sight of the censer.

"Mr. Widgeon down at the 'ome farm," he murmured reverently, "he says, if I'm a good boy, 'e'll let me watch 'im kill a pig Toosday."

He gazed out over the water-lilies, his thoughts far away. Maud shuddered. She wondered if medieval pages were ever quite as earthy as this.

"Perhaps you had better go now, Albert. They may be needing you in the house."

"Very good, m'lady."

Albert rose, not unwilling to call it a day. He was conscious of

the need for a quiet cigarette. He was fond of Maud, but a man can't spend all his time with the women.

"Pigs squeal like billy-o, m'lady!" he observed by way of adding a parting treasure to Maud's stock of general knowledge. "Oo! 'Ear 'em a mile orf, you can!"

Maud remained where she was, thinking, a wistful figure.

Tennyson's "Mariana" always made her wistful even when rendered by Albert. In the occasional moods of sentimental depression which came to vary her normal cheerfulness, it seemed to her that the poem might have been written with a prophetic eye to her special case, so nearly did it crystallize in magic words her own story.

"With blackest moss the flower-pots  
Were thickly crusted, one and all."

Well, no, not that particular part, perhaps. If he had found so much as one flower-pot of his even thinly crusted with any foreign substance, Lord Marshmoreton would have gone through the place like an east wind, dismissing gardeners and under-gardeners with every breath. But--

"She only said 'My life is dreary,  
He cometh not,' she said.  
She said 'I am aweary, aweary.



I would that I were dead!"

How exactly--at these moments when she was not out on the links picking them off the turf with a midiron or engaged in one of those other healthful sports which tend to take the mind off its troubles--those words summed up her case.

Why didn't Geoffrey come? Or at least write? She could not write to him. Letters from the castle left only by way of the castle post-bag, which Rogers, the chauffeur, took down to the village every evening. Impossible to entrust the kind of letter she wished to write to any mode of delivery so public--especially now, when her movements were watched. To open and read another's letters is a low and dastardly act, but she believed that Lady Caroline would do it like a shot. She longed to pour out her heart to Geoffrey in a long, intimate letter, but she did not dare to take the risk of writing for a wider public. Things were bad enough as it was, after that disastrous sortie to London.

At this point a soothing vision came to her--the vision of George Bevan knocking off her brother Percy's hat. It was the only pleasant thing that had happened almost as far back as she could remember. And then, for the first time, her mind condescended to dwell for a moment on the author of that act, George Bevan, the friend in need, whom she had met only the day before in the lane. What was George doing at Belphe? His presence there was

significant, and his words even more so. He had stated explicitly that he wished to help her.

She found herself oppressed by the irony of things. A knight had come to the rescue--but the wrong knight. Why could it not have been Geoffrey who waited in ambush outside the castle, and not a pleasant but negligible stranger? Whether, deep down in her consciousness, she was aware of a fleeting sense of disappointment in Geoffrey, a swiftly passing thought that he had failed her, she could hardly have said, so quickly did she crush it down.

She pondered on the arrival of George. What was the use of his being somewhere in the neighbourhood if she had no means of knowing where she could find him? Situated as she was, she could not wander at will about the countryside, looking for him. And, even if she found him, what then? There was not much that any stranger, however pleasant, could do.

She flushed at a sudden thought. Of course there was something George could do for her if he were willing. He could receive, despatch and deliver letters. If only she could get in touch with him, she could--through him--get in touch with Geoffrey.

The whole world changed for her. The sun was setting and chill little winds had begun to stir the lily-pads, giving a depressing air to the scene, but to Maud it seemed as if all Nature smiled.

With the egotism of love, she did not perceive that what she proposed to ask George to do was practically to fulfil the humble role of the hollow tree in which lovers dump letters, to be extracted later; she did not consider George's feelings at all. He had offered to help her, and this was his job. The world is full of Georges whose task it is to hang about in the background and make themselves unobtrusively useful.

She had reached this conclusion when Albert, who had taken a short cut the more rapidly to accomplish his errand, burst upon her dramatically from the heart of a rhododendron thicket.

"M'lady! Gentleman give me this to give yer!"

Maud read the note. It was brief, and to the point.

"I am staying near the castle at a cottage they call 'the one down by Platt's'. It is a rather new, red-brick place. You can easily find it. I shall be waiting there if you want me."

It was signed "The Man in the Cab".

"Do you know a cottage called 'the one down by Platt's', Albert?" asked Maud.

"Yes, m'lady. It's down by Platt's farm. I see a chicken killed there Wednesday week. Do you know, m'lady, after a chicken's 'ead is cut orf, it goes running licketty-split?"

Maud shivered slightly. Albert's fresh young enthusiasms frequently jarred upon her.

"I find a friend of mine is staying there. I want you to take a note to him from me."

"Very good, m'lady."

"And, Albert--"

"Yes, m'lady?"

"Perhaps it would be as well if you said nothing about this to any of your friends."

In Lord Marshmoreton's study a council of three was sitting in debate. The subject under discussion was that other note which George had written and so ill-advisedly entrusted to one whom he had taken for a guileless gardener. The council consisted of Lord Marshmoreton, looking rather shamefaced, his son Percy looking swollen and serious, and Lady Caroline Byng, looking like a tragedy queen.

"This," Lord Belpher was saying in a determined voice, "settles it. From now on Maud must not be allowed out of our sight."

Lord Marshmoreton spoke.

"I rather wish," he said regretfully, "I hadn't spoken about the note. I only mentioned it because I thought you might think it amusing."

"Amusing!" Lady Caroline's voice shook the furniture.

"Amusing that the fellow should have handed me of all people a letter for Maud," explained her brother. "I don't want to get Maud into trouble."

"You are criminally weak," said Lady Caroline severely. "I really honestly believe that you were capable of giving the note to that poor, misguided girl, and saying nothing about it." She flushed. "The insolence of the man, coming here and settling down at the very gates of the castle! If it was anybody but this man Platt who was giving him shelter I should insist on his being turned out. But that man Platt would be only too glad to know that he is causing us annoyance."

"Quite!" said Lord Belpher.

"You must go to this man as soon as possible," continued Lady Caroline, fixing her brother with a commanding stare, "and do your best to make him see how abominable his behaviour is."

"Oh, I couldn't!" pleaded the earl. "I don't know the fellow. He'd throw me out."

"Nonsense. Go at the very earliest opportunity."

"Oh, all right, all right, all right. Well, I think I'll be slipping out to the rose garden again now. There's a clear hour before dinner."

There was a tap at the door. Alice Faraday entered bearing papers, a smile of sweet helpfulness on her pretty face.

"I hoped I should find you here, Lord Marshmoreton. You promised to go over these notes with me, the ones about the Essex branch--"

The hunted peer looked as if he were about to dive through the window.

"Some other time, some other time. I--I have important matters--"

"Oh, if you're busy--"

"Of course, Lord Marshmoreton will be delighted to work on your notes, Miss Faraday," said Lady Caroline crisply. "Take this chair. We are just going."

Lord Marshmoreton gave one wistful glance through the open window. Then he sat down with a sigh, and felt for his reading-glasses.