CHAPTER 11.

George opened the letter with trembling and reverent fingers.

"DEAR MR. BEVAN,

"Thank you ever so much for your note, which Albert gave to me. How very, very kind. . ."

"Hey, mister!"

George looked up testily. The boy Albert had reappeared.

"What's the matter? Can't you find the cake?"

"I've found the kike," rejoined Albert, adducing proof of the statement in the shape of a massive slice, from which he took a substantial bite to assist thought. "But I can't find the ginger ile."

George waved him away. This interruption at such a moment was annoying.

"Look for it, child, look for it! Sniff after it! Bay on its trail!

It's somewhere about."

"Wri'!" mumbled Albert through the cake. He flicked a crumb off his cheek with a tongue which would have excited the friendly interest of an ant-eater. "I like ginger-ile."

"Well, go and bathe in it."

"Wri'!"

George returned to his letter.

"DEAR MR. BEVAN,

"Thank you ever so much for your note, which Albert gave to me. How very, very kind of you to come here like this and to say . . .

"Hey, mister!"

"Good Heavens!" George glared. "What's the matter now? Haven't you found that ginger-ale yet?"

"I've found the ginger-ile right enough, but I can't find the thing."

"The thing? What thing?"

"The thing. The thing wot you open ginger-ile with."

"Oh, you mean the thing? It's in the middle drawer of the dresser. Use your eyes, my boy!"

"Wri'".

George gave an overwrought sigh and began the letter again.

"DEAR MR. BEVAN,

"Thank you ever so much for your note which Albert gave to me. How very, very kind of you to come here like this and to say that you would help me. And how clever of you to find me after I was so secretive that day in the cab! You really can help me, if you are willing. It's too long to explain in a note, but I am in great trouble, and there is nobody except you to help me. I will explain everything when I see you. The difficulty will be to slip away from home. They are watching me every moment, I'm afraid. But I will try my hardest to see you very soon.

Yours sincerely,

"MAUD MARSH."

Just for a moment it must be confessed, the tone of the letter damped George. He could not have said just what he had expected, but certainly Reggie's revelations had prepared him for something rather warmer, something more in the style in which a girl would write to the man she loved. The next moment, however, he saw how foolish any such expectation had been. How on earth could any reasonable man expect a girl to let herself go at this stage of the proceedings? It was for him to make the first move. Naturally she wasn't going to reveal her feelings until he had revealed his.

George raised the letter to his lips and kissed it vigorously.

"Hey, mister!"

George started guiltily. The blush of shame overspread his cheeks. The room seemed to echo with the sound of that fatuous kiss.

"Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!" he called, snapping his fingers, and repeating the incriminating noise. "I was just calling my cat," he explained with dignity. "You didn't see her in there, did you?"

Albert's blue eyes met his in a derisive stare. The lid of the left one fluttered. It was but too plain that Albert was not convinced.

"A little black cat with white shirt-front," babbled George perseveringly. "She's usually either here or there, or--or

somewhere. Kitty, Kitty, Kitty!"

The cupid's bow of Albert's mouth parted. He uttered one word.

"Swank!"

There was a tense silence. What Albert was thinking one cannot say. The thoughts of Youth are long, long thoughts. What George was thinking was that the late King Herod had been unjustly blamed for a policy which had been both statesmanlike and in the interests of the public. He was blaming the mawkish sentimentality of the modern legal system which ranks the evisceration and secret burial of small boys as a crime.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"I've a good mind to--"

Albert waved a deprecating hand.

"It's all right, mister. I'm yer friend."

"You are, are you? Well, don't let it about. I've got a reputation to keep up."

"I'm yer friend, I tell you. I can help yer. I want to help yer!"

George's views on infanticide underwent a slight modification. After all, he felt, much must be excused to Youth. Youth thinks it funny to see a man kissing a letter. It is not funny, of course; it is beautiful; but it's no good arguing the point. Let Youth have its snigger, provided, after it has finished sniggering, it intends to buckle to and be of practical assistance. Albert, as an ally, was not to be despised. George did not know what Albert's duties as a page-boy were, but they seemed to be of a nature that gave him plenty of leisure and freedom; and a friendly resident of the castle with leisure and freedom was just what he needed.

"That's very good of you," he said, twisting his reluctant features into a fairly benevolent smile.

"I can 'elp!" persisted Albert. "Got a cigaroot?"

"Do you smoke, child?"

"When I get 'old of a cigaroot I do."

"I'm sorry I can't oblige you. I don't smoke cigarettes."

"Then I'll 'ave to 'ave one of my own," said Albert moodily.

He reached into the mysteries of his pocket and produced a piece of string, a knife, the wishbone of a fowl, two marbles, a crushed cigarette, and a match. Replacing the string, the knife, the wishbone and the marbles, he ignited the match against the tightest part of his person and lit the cigarette.

"I can help yer. I know the ropes."

"And smoke them," said George, wincing.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing."

Albert took an enjoyable whiff.

"I know all about yer."

"You do?"

"You and Lidy Mord."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"I was listening at the key-'ole while the row was goin' on."

"There was a row, was there?"

A faint smile of retrospective enjoyment lit up Albert's face. "An orful row! Shoutin' and yellin' and cussin' all over the shop. About you and Lidy Maud."

"And you drank it in, eh?"

"Pardon?"

"I say, you listened?"

"Not 'arf I listened. Seeing I'd just drawn you in the sweepstike, of course, I listened--not 'arf!"

George did not follow him here.

"The sweepstike? What's a sweepstike?"

"Why, a thing you puts names in 'ats and draw 'em and the one that gets the winning name wins the money."

"Oh, you mean a sweepstake!"

"That's wot I said--a sweepstike."

George was still puzzled.

"But I don't understand. How do you mean you drew me in a sweepstike--I mean a sweepstake? What sweepstake?"

"Down in the servants' 'all. Keggs, the butler, started it. I 'eard 'im say he always 'ad one every place 'e was in as a butler--leastways, whenever there was any dorters of the 'ouse. There's always a chance, when there's a 'ouse-party, of one of the dorters of the 'ouse gettin' married to one of the gents in the party, so Keggs 'e puts all of the gents' names in an 'at, and you pay five shillings for a chance, and the one that draws the winning name gets the money. And if the dorter of the 'ouse don't get married that time, the money's put away and added to the pool for the next 'ouse-party."

George gasped. This revelation of life below stairs in the stately homes of England took his breath away. Then astonishment gave way to indignation.

"Do you mean to tell me that you--you worms--made Lady Maud the--the prize of a sweepstake!"

Albert was hurt.

"Who're yer calling worms?"

George perceived the need of diplomacy. After all much depended on this child's goodwill.

"I was referring to the butler--what's his name--Keggs."

"'E ain't a worm. 'E's a serpint." Albert drew at his cigarette. His brow darkened. "'E does the drawing, Keggs does, and I'd like to know 'ow it is 'e always manages to cop the fav'rit!"

Albert chuckled.

"But this time I done him proper. 'E didn't want me in the thing at all. Said I was too young. Tried to do the drawin' without me. 'Clip that boy one side of the 'ead!' 'e says, 'and turn 'im out!' 'e says. I says, 'Yus, you will!' I says. 'And wot price me goin' to 'is lordship and blowing the gaff?' I says. 'E says, 'Oh, orl right!' 'e says. 'Ave it yer own way!' 'e says.

"'Where's yer five shillings?' 'e says. "Ere yer are!' I says. 'Oh, very well,' 'e says. 'But you'll 'ave to draw last,' 'e says, 'bein' the youngest.' Well, they started drawing the names, and of course Keggs 'as to draw Mr. Byng."

"Oh, he drew Mr. Byng, did he?"

"Yus. And everyone knew Reggie was the fav'rit. Smiled all over his fat face, the old serpint did! And when it come to my turn, 'e says to me, 'Sorry, Elbert!' 'e says, 'but there ain't no more names. They've give out!' 'Oh, they 'ave, 'ave they?' I says, 'Well, wot's the matter with giving a fellow a sporting chance?' I says. 'Ow do you mean?' 'e says. 'Why, write me out a ticket marked "Mr. X.",' I says. 'Then, if 'er lidyship marries anyone not in the 'ouse-party, I cop!' 'Orl right,' 'e says, 'but you know the conditions of this 'ere sweep. Nothin' don't count only wot tikes plice during the two weeks of the 'ouse-party,' 'e says. 'Orl right,' I says. 'Write me ticket. It's a fair sportin' venture.' So 'e writes me out me ticket, with 'Mr. X.' on it, and I says to them all, I says, 'I'd like to 'ave witnesses', I says, 'to this 'ere thing. Do all you gents agree that if anyone not in the 'ouse-party and 'oo's name ain't on one of the other tickets marries 'er lidyship, I get the pool?' I says. They all says that's right, and then I says to 'em all straight out, I says, 'I 'appen to know', I says, 'that 'er lidyship is in love with a gent that's not in the party at all. An American gent,' I says. They wouldn't believe it at first, but, when Keggs 'ad put two and two together, and thought of one or two things that 'ad 'appened, 'e turned as white as a sheet and said it was a swindle and wanted the drawin' done over again, but the others says 'No', they says, 'it's quite fair,' they says, and one of 'em offered me ten bob slap out for my ticket. But I stuck to it, I did. And that," concluded Albert throwing the cigarette into

the fire-place just in time to prevent a scorched finger, "that's why I'm going to 'elp yer!"

There is probably no attitude of mind harder for the average man to maintain than that of aloof disapproval. George was an average man, and during the degrading recital just concluded he had found himself slipping. At first he had been revolted, then, in spite of himself, amused, and now, when all the facts were before him, he could induce his mind to think of nothing else than his good fortune in securing as an ally one who appeared to combine a precocious intelligence with a helpful lack of scruple. War is war, and love is love, and in each the practical man inclines to demand from his fellow-workers the punch rather than a lofty soul. A page boy replete with the finer feelings would have been useless in this crisis. Albert, who seemed, on the evidence of a short but sufficient acquaintance, to be a lad who would not recognize the finer feelings if they were handed to him on a plate with watercress round them, promised to be invaluable. Something in his manner told George that the child was bursting with schemes for his benefit.

"Have some more cake, Albert," he said ingratiatingly.

The boy shook his head.

"Do," urged George. "Just a little slice."

"There ain't no little slice," replied Albert with regret.
"I've ate it all." He sighed and resumed. "I gotta scheme!"

"Fine! What is it?"

Albert knitted his brows.

"It's like this. You want to see 'er lidyship, but you can't come to the castle, and she can't come to you--not with 'er fat brother dogging of 'er footsteps. That's it, ain't it? Or am I a liar?"

George hastened to reassure him.

"That is exactly it. What's the answer?"

"I'll tell yer wot you can do. There's the big ball tonight 'cos of its bein' 'Is Nibs' comin'-of-age tomorrow. All the county'll be 'ere."

"You think I could slip in and be taken for a guest?"

Albert snorted contempt.

"No, I don't think nothin' of the kind, not bein' a fat-head." George apologized. "But wot you could do's this. I 'eard Keggs

torkin to the 'ouse-keeper about 'avin' to get in a lot of temp'y waiters to 'elp out for the night--"

George reached forward and patted Albert on the head.

"Don't mess my 'air, now," warned that youth coldly.

"Albert, you're one of the great thinkers of the age. I could get into the castle as a waiter, and you could tell Lady Maud I was there, and we could arrange a meeting. Machiavelli couldn't have thought of anything smoother."

"Mac Who?"

"One of your ancestors. Great schemer in his day. But, one moment."

"Now what?"

"How am I to get engaged? How do I get the job?"

"That's orl right. I'll tell the 'ousekeeper you're my cousin--been a waiter in America at the best restaurongs--'ome for a 'oliday, but'll come in for one night to oblige. They'll pay yer a quid."

"I'll hand it over to you."

"Just," said Albert approvingly, "wot I was goin' to suggest myself."

"Then I'll leave all the arrangements to you."

"You'd better, if you don't want to mike a mess of everything. All you've got to do is to come to the servants' entrance at eight sharp tonight and say you're my cousin."

"That's an awful thing to ask anyone to say."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing!" said George.