

CHAPTER 12.

The great ball in honour of Lord Belpher's coming-of-age was at its height. The reporter of the *Belpher Intelligencer and Farmers' Guide*, who was present in his official capacity, and had been allowed by butler Keggs to take a peep at the scene through a side-door, justly observed in his account of the proceedings next day that the 'tout ensemble was fairylike', and described the company as 'a galaxy of fair women and brave men'. The floor was crowded with all that was best and noblest in the county; so that a half-brick, hurled at any given moment, must infallibly have spilt blue blood. Peers stepped on the toes of knights; honorables bumped into the spines of baronets. Probably the only titled person in the whole of the surrounding country who was not playing his part in the glittering scene was Lord Marshmoreton; who, on discovering that his private study had been converted into a cloakroom, had retired to bed with a pipe and a copy of *Roses Red and Roses White*, by Emily Ann Mackintosh (Popgood, Crooly & Co.), which he was to discover--after he was between the sheets, and it was too late to repair the error--was not, as he had supposed, a treatise on his favourite hobby, but a novel of stearine sentimentality dealing with the adventures of a pure young English girl and an artist named Claude.

George, from the shaded seclusion of a gallery, looked down upon the brilliant throng with impatience. It seemed to him that he had

been doing this all his life. The novelty of the experience had long since ceased to divert him. It was all just like the second act of an old-fashioned musical comedy (Act Two: The Ballroom, Grantchester Towers: One Week Later)--a resemblance which was heightened for him by the fact that the band had more than once played dead and buried melodies of his own composition, of which he had wearied a full eighteen months back.

A complete absence of obstacles had attended his intrusion into the castle. A brief interview with a motherly old lady, whom even Albert seemed to treat with respect, and who, it appeared was Mrs. Digby, the house-keeper; followed by an even briefer encounter with Keggs (fussy and irritable with responsibility, and, even while talking to George carrying on two other conversations on topics of the moment), and he was past the censors and free for one night only to add his presence to the chosen inside the walls of Belpher. His duties were to stand in this gallery, and with the assistance of one of the maids to minister to the comfort of such of the dancers as should use it as a sitting-out place. None had so far made their appearance, the superior attractions of the main floor having exercised a great appeal; and for the past hour George had been alone with the maid and his thoughts. The maid, having asked George if he knew her cousin Frank, who had been in America nearly a year, and having received a reply in the negative, seemed to be disappointed in him, and to lose interest, and had not spoken for twenty minutes.

George scanned the approaches to the balcony for a sight of Albert as the shipwrecked mariner scans the horizon for the passing sail. It was inevitable, he supposed, this waiting. It would be difficult for Maud to slip away even for a moment on such a night.

"I say, laddie, would you mind getting me a lemonade?"

George was gazing over the balcony when the voice spoke behind him, and the muscles of his back stiffened as he recognized its genial note. This was one of the things he had prepared himself for, but, now that it had happened, he felt a wave of stage-fright such as he had only once experienced before in his life--on the occasion when he had been young enough and inexperienced enough to take a curtain-call on a first night. Reggie Byng was friendly, and would not wilfully betray him; but Reggie was also a babbler, who could not be trusted to keep things to himself. It was necessary, he perceived, to take a strong line from the start, and convince Reggie that any likeness which the latter might suppose that he detected between his companion of that afternoon and the waiter of tonight existed only in his heated imagination.

As George turned, Reggie's pleasant face, pink with healthful exercise and Lord Marshmoreton's finest Bollinger, lost most of its colour. His eyes and mouth opened wider. The fact is Reggie was shaken. All through the earlier part of the evening he had been

sedulously priming himself with stimulants with a view to amassing enough nerve to propose to Alice Faraday: and, now that he had drawn her away from the throng to this secluded nook and was about to put his fortune to the test, a horrible fear swept over him that he had overdone it. He was having optical illusions.

"Good God!"

Reggie loosened his collar, and pulled himself together.

"Would you mind taking a glass of lemonade to the lady in blue sitting on the settee over there by the statue," he said carefully.

He brightened up a little.

"Pretty good that! Not absolutely a test sentence, perhaps, like 'Truly rural' or 'The intricacies of the British Constitution'. But nevertheless no mean feat."

"I say!" he continued, after a pause.

"Sir?"

"You haven't ever seen me before by any chance, if you know what I mean, have you?"

"No, sir."

"You haven't a brother, or anything of that shape or order, have you, no?"

"No, sir. I have often wished I had. I ought to have spoken to father about it. Father could never deny me anything."

Reggie blinked. His misgiving returned. Either his ears, like his eyes, were playing him tricks, or else this waiter-chappie was talking pure drivel.

"What's that?"

"Sir?"

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'No, sir, I have no brother'."

"Didn't you say something else?"

"No, sir."

"What?"

"No, sir."

Reggie's worst suspicions were confirmed.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Then I am!"

Miss Faraday, when he joined her on the settee, wanted an explanation.

"What were you talking to that man about, Mr. Byng? You seemed to be having a very interesting conversation."

"I was asking him if he had a brother."

Miss Faraday glanced quickly at him. She had had a feeling for some time during the evening that his manner had been strange.

"A brother? What made you ask him that?"

"He--I mean--that is to say--what I mean is, he looked the sort of chap who might have a brother. Lots of those fellows have!"

Alice Faraday's face took on a motherly look. She was fonder of Reggie than that love-sick youth supposed, and by sheer accident he had stumbled on the right road to her consideration. Alice Faraday was one of those girls whose dream it is to be a ministering angel

to some chosen man, to be a good influence to him and raise him to an appreciation of nobler things. Hitherto, Reggie's personality had seemed to her agreeable, but negative. A positive vice like over-indulgence in alcohol altered him completely. It gave him a significance.

"I told him to get you a lemonade," said Reggie. "He seems to be taking his time about it. Hi!"

George approached deferentially.

"Sir?"

"Where's that lemonade?"

"Lemonade, sir?"

"Didn't I ask you to bring this lady a glass of lemonade?"

"I did not understand you to do so, sir."

"But, Great Scott! What were we chatting about, then?"

"You were telling me a diverting story about an Irishman who landed in New York looking for work, sir. You would like a glass of lemonade, sir? Very good, sir."

Alice placed a hand gently on Reggie's arm.

"Don't you think you had better lie down for a little and rest, Mr. Byng? I'm sure it would do you good."

The solicitous note in her voice made Reggie quiver like a jelly. He had never known her speak like that before. For a moment he was inclined to lay bare his soul; but his nerve was broken. He did not want her to mistake the outpouring of a strong man's heart for the irresponsible ravings of a too hearty diner. It was one of Life's ironies. Here he was for the first time all keyed up to go right ahead, and he couldn't do it.

"It's the heat of the room," said Alice. "Shall we go and sit outside on the terrace? Never mind about the lemonade. I'm not really thirsty."

Reggie followed her like a lamb. The prospect of the cool night air was grateful.

"That," murmured George, as he watched them depart, "ought to hold you for a while!"

He perceived Albert hastening towards him.