

## CHAPTER 13.

Albert was in a hurry. He skimmed over the carpet like a water-beetle.

"Quick!" he said.

He cast a glance at the maid, George's co-worker. She was reading a novelette with her back turned.

"Tell 'er you'll be back in five minutes," said Albert, jerking a thumb.

"Unnecessary. She won't notice my absence. Ever since she discovered that I had never met her cousin Frank in America, I have meant nothing in her life."

"Then come on."

"Where?"

"I'll show you."

That it was not the nearest and most direct route which they took to the trysting-place George became aware after he had followed his young guide through doors and up stairs and down stairs and had at

last come to a halt in a room to which the sound of the music penetrated but faintly. He recognized the room. He had been in it before. It was the same room where he and Billie Dore had listened to Keggs telling the story of Lord Leonard and his leap. That window there, he remembered now, opened on to the very balcony from which the historic Leonard had done his spectacular dive. That it should be the scene of this other secret meeting struck George as appropriate. The coincidence appealed to him.

Albert vanished. George took a deep breath. Now that the moment had arrived for which he had waited so long he was aware of a return of that feeling of stage-fright which had come upon him when he heard Reggie Byng's voice. This sort of thing, it must be remembered, was not in George's usual line. His had been a quiet and uneventful life, and the only exciting thing which, in his recollection, had ever happened to him previous to the dramatic entry of Lady Maud into his taxi-cab that day in Piccadilly, had occurred at college nearly ten years before, when a festive room-mate--no doubt with the best motives--had placed a Mexican horned toad in his bed on the night of the Yale football game.

A light footstep sounded outside, and the room whirled round George in a manner which, if it had happened to Reggie Byng, would have caused that injudicious drinker to abandon the habits of a lifetime. When the furniture had returned to its place and the rug had ceased to spin, Maud was standing before him.

Nothing is harder to remember than a once-seen face. It had caused George a good deal of distress and inconvenience that, try as he might, he could not conjure up anything more than a vague vision of what the only girl in the world really looked like. He had carried away with him from their meeting in the cab only a confused recollection of eyes that shone and a mouth that curved in a smile; and the brief moment in which he was able to refresh his memory, when he found her in the lane with Reggie Byng and the broken-down car, had not been enough to add definiteness. The consequence was that Maud came upon him now with the stunning effect of beauty seen for the first time. He gasped. In that dazzling ball-dress, with the flush of dancing on her cheeks and the light of dancing in her eyes, she was so much more wonderful than any picture of her which memory had been able to produce for his inspection that it was as if he had never seen her before.

Even her brother, Percy, a stern critic where his nearest and dearest were concerned, had admitted on meeting her in the drawing-room before dinner that that particular dress suited Maud. It was a shimmering dream-thing of rose-leaves and moon-beams. That, at least, was how it struck George; a dressmaker would have found a longer and less romantic description for it. But that does not matter. Whoever wishes for a cold and technical catalogue of the stuffs which went to make up the picture that deprived George of speech may consult the files of the *Belpher Intelligencer* and

Farmers' Guide, and read the report of the editor's wife, who "does" the dresses for the Intelligencer under the pen-name of "Birdie Bright-Eye". As far as George was concerned, the thing was made of rose-leaves and moon-beams.

George, as I say, was deprived of speech. That any girl could possibly look so beautiful was enough to paralyse his faculties; but that this ethereal being straight from Fairyland could have stooped to love him--him--an earthy brute who wore sock-suspenders and drank coffee for breakfast . . . that was what robbed George of the power to articulate. He could do nothing but look at her.

From the Hills of Fairyland soft music came. Or, if we must be exact, Maud spoke.

"I couldn't get away before!" Then she stopped short and darted to the door listening. "Was that somebody coming? I had to cut a dance with Mr. Plummer to get here, and I'm so afraid he may. . ."

He had. A moment later it was only too evident that this was precisely what Mr. Plummer had done. There was a footstep on the stairs, a heavy footstep this time, and from outside the voice of the pursuer made itself heard.

"Oh, there you are, Lady Maud! I was looking for you. This is our dance."

George did not know who Mr. Plummer was. He did not want to know. His only thought regarding Mr. Plummer was a passionate realization of the superfluity of his existence. It is the presence on the globe of these Plummers that delays the coming of the Millennium.

His stunned mind leaped into sudden activity. He must not be found here, that was certain. Waiters who ramble at large about a feudal castle and are discovered in conversation with the daughter of the house excite comment. And, conversely, daughters of the house who talk in secluded rooms with waiters also find explanations necessary. He must withdraw. He must withdraw quickly. And, as a gesture from Maud indicated, the withdrawal must be effected through the french window opening on the balcony. Estimating the distance that separated him from the approaching Plummer at three stairs--the voice had come from below--and a landing, the space of time allotted to him by a hustling Fate for disappearing was some four seconds. Inside two and half, the french window had opened and closed, and George was out under the stars, with the cool winds of the night playing on his heated forehead.

He had now time for meditation. There are few situations which provide more scope for meditation than that of the man penned up on a small balcony a considerable distance from the ground, with his only avenue of retreat cut off behind him. So George meditated. First, he mused on Plummer. He thought some hard thoughts about

Plummer. Then he brooded on the unkindness of a fortune which had granted him the opportunity of this meeting with Maud, only to snatch it away almost before it had begun. He wondered how long the late Lord Leonard had been permitted to talk on that occasion before he, too, had had to retire through these same windows. There was no doubt about one thing. Lovers who chose that room for their interviews seemed to have very little luck.

It had not occurred to George at first that there could be any further disadvantage attached to his position other than the obvious drawbacks which had already come to his notice. He was now to perceive that he had been mistaken. A voice was speaking in the room he had left, a plainly audible voice, deep and throaty; and within a minute George had become aware that he was to suffer the additional discomfort of being obliged to listen to a fellow man--one could call Plummer that by stretching the facts a little--proposing marriage. The gruesomeness of the situation became intensified. Of all moments when a man--and justice compelled George to admit that Plummer was technically human--of all moments when a man may by all the laws of decency demand to be alone without an audience of his own sex, the chiefest is the moment when he is asking a girl to marry him. George's was a sensitive nature, and he writhed at the thought of playing the eavesdropper at such a time.

He looked frantically about him for a means of escape. Plummer had now reached the stage of saying at great length that he was not

worthy of Maud. He said it over and over, again in different ways. George was in hearty agreement with him, but he did not want to hear it. He wanted to get away. But how? Lord Leonard on a similar occasion had leaped. Some might argue therefore on the principle that what man has done, man can do, that George should have imitated him. But men differ. There was a man attached to a circus who used to dive off the roof of Madison Square Garden on to a sloping board, strike it with his chest, turn a couple of somersaults, reach the ground, bow six times and go off to lunch. That sort of thing is a gift. Some of us have it, some have not. George had not. Painful as it was to hear Plummer floundering through his proposal of marriage, instinct told him that it would be far more painful to hurl himself out into mid-air on the sporting chance of having his downward progress arrested by the branches of the big tree that had upheld Lord Leonard. No, there seemed nothing for it but to remain where he was.

Inside the room Plummer was now saying how much the marriage would please his mother.

"Psst!"

George looked about him. It seemed to him that he had heard a voice. He listened. No. Except for the barking of a distant dog, the faint wailing of a waltz, the rustle of a roosting bird, and the sound of Plummer saying that if her refusal was due to anything

she might have heard about that breach-of-promise case of his a couple of years ago he would like to state that he was more sinned against than sinning and that the girl had absolutely misunderstood him, all was still.

"Psst! Hey, mister!"

It was a voice. It came from above. Was it an angel's voice? Not altogether. It was Albert's. The boy was leaning out of a window some six feet higher up the castle wall. George, his eyes by now grown used to the darkness, perceived that the stripling gesticulated as one having some message to impart. Then, glancing to one side, he saw what looked like some kind of a rope swayed against the wall. He reached for it. The thing was not a rope: it was a knotted sheet.

From above came Albert's hoarse whisper.

"Look alive!"

This was precisely what George wanted to do for at least another fifty years or so; and it seemed to him as he stood there in the starlight, gingerly fingering this flimsy linen thing, that if he were to suspend his hundred and eighty pounds of bone and sinew at the end of it over the black gulf outside the balcony he would look alive for about five seconds, and after that goodness only knew how



he would look. He knew all about knotted sheets. He had read a hundred stories in which heroes, heroines, low comedy friends and even villains did all sorts of reckless things with their assistance. There was not much comfort to be derived from that. It was one thing to read about people doing silly things like that, quite another to do them yourself. He gave Albert's sheet a tentative shake. In all his experience he thought he had never come across anything so supremely unstable. (One calls it Albert's sheet for the sake of convenience. It was really Reggie Byng's sheet. And when Reggie got to his room in the small hours of the morning and found the thing a mass of knots he jumped to the conclusion--being a simple-hearted young man--that his bosom friend Jack Ferris, who had come up from London to see Lord Belpher through the trying experience of a coming-of-age party, had done it as a practical joke, and went and poured a jug of water over Jack's bed. That is Life. Just one long succession of misunderstandings and rash acts and what not. Absolutely!)

Albert was becoming impatient. He was in the position of a great general who thinks out some wonderful piece of strategy and can't get his army to carry it out. Many boys, seeing Plummer enter the room below and listening at the keyhole and realizing that George must have hidden somewhere and deducing that he must be out on the balcony, would have been baffled as to how to proceed. Not so Albert. To dash up to Reggie Byng's room and strip his sheet off the bed and tie it to the bed-post and fashion a series of knots in

it and lower it out of the window took Albert about three minutes. His part in the business had been performed without a hitch. And now George, who had nothing in the world to do but the childish task of climbing up the sheet, was jeopardizing the success of the whole scheme by delay. Albert gave the sheet an irritable jerk.

It was the worst thing he could have done. George had almost made up his mind to take a chance when the sheet was snatched from his grasp as if it had been some live thing deliberately eluding his clutch. The thought of what would have happened had this occurred when he was in mid-air caused him to break out in a cold perspiration. He retired a pace and perched himself on the rail of the balcony.

"Psst!" said Albert.

"It's no good saying, 'Psst!'" rejoined George in an annoyed undertone. "I could say 'Psst!' Any fool could say 'Psst!'"

Albert, he considered, in leaning out of the window and saying "Psst!" was merely touching the fringe of the subject.

It is probable that he would have remained seated on the balcony rail regarding the sheet with cold aversion, indefinitely, had not his hand been forced by the man Plummer. Plummer, during these last minutes, had shot his bolt. He had said everything that a man could

say, much of it twice over; and now he was through. All was ended. The verdict was in. No wedding-bells for Plummer.

"I think," said Plummer gloomily, and the words smote on George's ear like a knell, "I think I'd like a little air."

George leaped from his rail like a hunted grasshopper. If Plummer was looking for air, it meant that he was going to come out on the balcony. There was only one thing to be done. It probably meant the abrupt conclusion of a promising career, but he could hesitate no longer.

George grasped the sheet--it felt like a rope of cobwebs--and swung himself out.

Maud looked out on to the balcony. Her heart, which had stood still when the rejected one opened the window and stepped forth to commune with the soothing stars, beat again. There was no one there, only emptiness and Plummer.

"This," said Plummer sombrely, gazing over the rail into the darkness, "is the place where that fellow what's-his-name jumped off in the reign of thingummy, isn't it?"

Maud understood now, and a thrill of the purest admiration for George's heroism swept over her. So rather than compromise her, he

had done Leonard's leap! How splendid of him! If George, now sitting on Reggie Byng's bed taking a rueful census of the bits of skin remaining on his hands and knees after his climb, could have read her thoughts, he would have felt well rewarded for his abrasions.

"I've a jolly good mind," said Plummer, "to do it myself!" He uttered a short, mirthless laugh. "Well, anyway," he said recklessly, "I'll jolly well go downstairs and have a brandy-and-soda!"

Albert finished untying the sheet from the bedpost, and stuffed it under the pillow.

"And now," said Albert, "for a quiet smoke in the scullery."

These massive minds require their moments of relaxation.