

CHAPTER 14.

George's idea was to get home. Quick. There was no possible chance of a second meeting with Maud that night. They had met and had been whirled asunder. No use to struggle with Fate. Best to give in and hope that another time Fate would be kinder. What George wanted now was to be away from all the gay glitter and the fairylike tout ensemble and the galaxy of fair women and brave men, safe in his own easy-chair, where nothing could happen to him. A nice sense of duty would no doubt have taken him back to his post in order fully to earn the sovereign which had been paid to him for his services as temporary waiter; but the voice of Duty called to him in vain. If the British aristocracy desired refreshments let them get them for themselves--and like it! He was through.

But if George had for the time being done with the British aristocracy, the British aristocracy had not done with him. Hardly had he reached the hall when he encountered the one member of the order whom he would most gladly have avoided.

Lord Belfer was not in genial mood. Late hours always made his head ache, and he was not a dancing man; so that he was by now fully as weary of the fairylike tout ensemble as was George. But, being the centre and cause of the night's proceedings, he was compelled to be present to the finish. He was in the position of captains who must be last to leave their ships, and of boys who

stand on burning decks whence all but they had fled. He had spent several hours shaking hands with total strangers and receiving with a frozen smile their felicitations on the attainment of his majority, and he could not have been called upon to meet a larger horde of relations than had surged round him that night if he had been a rabbit. The Belpher connection was wide, straggling over most of England; and first cousins, second cousins and even third and fourth cousins had debouched from practically every county on the map and marched upon the home of their ancestors. The effort of having to be civil to all of these had told upon Percy. Like the heroine of his sister Maud's favourite poem he was "awearry, awarey," and he wanted a drink. He regarded George's appearance as exceedingly opportune.

"Get me a small bottle of champagne, and bring it to the library."

"Yes, sir."

The two words sound innocent enough, but, wishing as he did to efface himself and avoid publicity, they were the most unfortunate which George could have chosen. If he had merely bowed acquiescence and departed, it is probable that Lord Belpher would not have taken a second look at him. Percy was in no condition to subject everyone he met to a minute scrutiny. But, when you have been addressed for an entire lifetime as "your lordship", it startles you when a waiter calls you "Sir". Lord Belpher gave George a glance in which

reproof and pain were nicely mingled emotions quickly supplanted by amazement. A gurgle escaped him.

"Stop!" he cried as George turned away.

Percy was rattled. The crisis found him in two minds. On the one hand, he would have been prepared to take oath that this man before him was the man who had knocked off his hat in Piccadilly. The likeness had struck him like a blow the moment he had taken a good look at the fellow. On the other hand, there is nothing which is more likely to lead one astray than a resemblance. He had never forgotten the horror and humiliation of the occasion, which had happened in his fourteenth year, when a motherly woman at Paddington Station had called him "dearie" and publicly embraced him, on the erroneous supposition that he was her nephew, Philip. He must proceed cautiously. A brawl with an innocent waiter, coming on the heels of that infernal episode with the policeman, would give people the impression that assailing the lower orders had become a hobby of his.

"Sir?" said George politely.

His brazen front shook Lord Belpher's confidence.

"I haven't seen you before here, have I?" was all he could find to say.

"No, sir," replied George smoothly. "I am only temporarily attached to the castle staff."

"Where do you come from?"

"America, sir."

Lord Belpheer started. "America!"

"Yes, sir. I am in England on a vacation. My cousin, Albert, is page boy at the castle, and he told me there were a few vacancies for extra help tonight, so I applied and was given the job."

Lord Belpheer frowned perplexedly. It all sounded entirely plausible. And, what was satisfactory, the statement could be checked by application to Keggs, the butler. And yet there was a lingering doubt. However, there seemed nothing to be gained by continuing the conversation.

"I see," he said at last. "Well, bring that champagne to the library as quick as you can."

"Very good, sir."

Lord Belpheer remained where he stood, brooding. Reason told him he

ought to be satisfied, but he was not satisfied. It would have been different had he not known that this fellow with whom Maud had become entangled was in the neighbourhood. And if that scoundrel had had the audacity to come and take a cottage at the castle gates, why not the audacity to invade the castle itself?

The appearance of one of the footmen, on his way through the hall with a tray, gave him the opportunity for further investigation.

"Send Keggs to me!"

"Very good, your lordship."

An interval and the butler arrived. Unlike Lord Belpher late hours were no hardship to Keggs. He was essentially a night-blooming flower. His brow was as free from wrinkles as his shirt-front. He bore himself with the conscious dignity of one who, while he would have freely admitted he did not actually own the castle, was nevertheless aware that he was one of its most conspicuous ornaments.

"You wished to see me, your lordship?"

"Yes. Keggs, there are a number of outside men helping here tonight, aren't there?"

"Indubitably, your lordship. The unprecedented scale of the entertainment necessitated the engagement of a certain number of supernumeraries," replied Keggs with an easy fluency which Reggie Byng, now cooling his head on the lower terrace, would have bitterly envied. "In the circumstances, such an arrangement was inevitable."

"You engaged all these men yourself?"

"In a manner of speaking, your lordship, and for all practical purposes, yes. Mrs. Digby, the 'ouse-keeper conducted the actual negotiations in many cases, but the arrangement was in no instance considered complete until I had passed each applicant."

"Do you know anything of an American who says he is the cousin of the page-boy?"

"The boy Albert did introduce a nominee whom he stated to be 'is cousin 'ome from New York on a visit and anxious to oblige. I trust he 'as given no dissatisfaction, your lordship? He seemed a respectable young man."

"No, no, not at all. I merely wished to know if you knew him. One can't be too careful."

"No, indeed, your lordship."

"That's all, then."

"Thank you, your lordship."

Lord Belpheer was satisfied. He was also relieved. He felt that prudence and a steady head had kept him from making himself ridiculous. When George presently returned with the life-saving fluid, he thanked him and turned his thoughts to other things.

But, if the young master was satisfied, Keggs was not. Upon Keggs a bright light had shone. There were few men, he flattered himself, who could more readily put two and two together and bring the sum to a correct answer. Keggs knew of the strange American gentleman who had taken up his abode at the cottage down by Platt's farm. His looks, his habits, and his motives for coming there had formed food for discussion throughout one meal in the servant's hall; a stranger whose abstention from brush and palette showed him to be no artist being an object of interest. And while the solution put forward by a romantic lady's-maid, a great reader of novelettes, that the young man had come there to cure himself of some unhappy passion by communing with nature, had been scoffed at by the company, Keggs had not been so sure that there might not be something in it. Later events had deepened his suspicion, which now, after this interview with Lord Belpheer, had become certainty.

The extreme fishiness of Albert's sudden production of a cousin from America was so manifest that only his preoccupation at the moment when he met the young man could have prevented him seeing it before. His knowledge of Albert told him that, if one so versed as that youth in the art of Swank had really possessed a cousin in America, he would long ago have been boring the servants' hall with fictions about the man's wealth and importance. For Albert not to lie about a thing, practically proved that thing non-existent. Such was the simple creed of Keggs.

He accosted a passing fellow-servitor.

"Seen young blighted Albert anywhere, Freddy?"

It was in this shameful manner that that mastermind was habitually referred to below stairs.

"Seen 'im going into the scullery not 'arf a minute ago," replied Freddy.

"Thanks."

"So long," said Freddy.

"Be good!" returned Keggs, whose mode of speech among those of his own world differed substantially from that which he considered it

became him to employ when conversing with the titled.

The fall of great men is but too often due to the failure of their miserable bodies to give the necessary support to their great brains. There are some, for example, who say that Napoleon would have won the battle of Waterloo if he had not had dyspepsia. Not otherwise was it with Albert on that present occasion. The arrival of Keggs found him at a disadvantage. He had been imprudent enough, on leaving George, to endeavour to smoke a cigar, purloined from the box which stood hospitably open on a table in the hall. But for this, who knows with what cunning counter-attacks he might have foiled the butler's onslaught? As it was, the battle was a walk-over for the enemy.

"I've been looking for you, young blighted Albert!" said Keggs coldly.

Albert turned a green but defiant face to the foe.

"Go and boil yer 'ead!" he advised.

"Never mind about my 'ead. If I was to do my duty to you, I'd give you a clip side of your 'ead, that's what I'd do."

"And then bury it in the woods," added Albert, wincing as the consequences of his rash act swept through his small form like some

nauseous tidal wave. He shut his eyes. It upset him to see Keggs shimmering like that. A shimmering butler is an awful sight.

Keggs laughed a hard laugh. "You and your cousins from America!"

"What about my cousins from America?"

"Yes, what about them? That's just what Lord Belpheer and me have been asking ourselves."

"I don't know wot you're talking about."

"You soon will, young blighted Albert! Who sneaked that American fellow into the 'ouse to meet Lady Maud?"

"I never!"

"Think I didn't see through your little game? Why, I knew from the first."

"Yes, you did! Then why did you let him into the place?"

Keggs snorted triumphantly. "There! You admit it! It was that feller!"

Too late Albert saw his false move--a move which in a normal state

of health, he would have scorned to make. Just as Napoleon, minus a stomach-ache, would have scorned the blunder that sent his Cuirassiers plunging to destruction in the sunken road.

"I don't know what you're torkin' about," he said weakly.

"Well," said Keggs, "I haven't time to stand 'ere chatting with you. I must be going back to 'is lordship, to tell 'im of the 'orrid trick you played on him."

A second spasm shook Albert to the core of his being. The double assault was too much for him. Betrayed by the body, the spirit yielded.

"You wouldn't do that, Mr. Keggs!"

There was a white flag in every syllable.

"I would if I did my duty."

"But you don't care about that," urged Albert ingratiatingly.

"I'll have to think it over," mused Keggs. "I don't want to be 'ard on a young boy." He struggled silently with himself. "Ruinin' 'is prospecks!"

An inspiration seemed to come to him.

"All right, young blighted Albert," he said briskly. "I'll go against my better nature this once and chance it. And now, young feller me lad, you just 'and over that ticket of yours! You know what I'm alloodin' to! That ticket you 'ad at the sweep, the one with 'Mr. X' on it."

Albert's indomitable spirit triumphed for a moment over his stricken body.

"That's likely, ain't it!"

Keggs sighed--the sigh of a good man who has done his best to help a fellow-being and has been baffled by the other's perversity.

"Just as you please," he said sorrowfully. "But I did 'ope I shouldn't 'ave to go to 'is lordship and tell 'im 'ow you've deceived him."

Albert capitulated. "'Ere yer are!" A piece of paper changed hands.

"It's men like you wot lead to 'arf the crime in the country!"

"Much obliged, me lad."

"You'd walk a mile in the snow, you would," continued Albert

pursuing his train of thought, "to rob a starving beggar of a ha'penny."

"Who's robbing anyone? Don't you talk so quick, young man. I'm doing the right thing by you. You can 'ave my ticket, marked 'Reggie Byng'. It's a fair exchange, and no one the worse!"

"Fat lot of good that is!"

"That's as it may be. Anyhow, there it is." Keggs prepared to withdraw. "You're too young to 'ave all that money, Albert. You wouldn't know what to do with it. It wouldn't make you 'appy. There's other things in the world besides winning sweepstakes. And, properly speaking, you ought never to have been allowed to draw at all, being so young."

Albert groaned hollowly. "When you've finished torkin', I wish you'd kindly have the goodness to leave me alone. I'm not meself."

"That," said Keggs cordially, "is a bit of luck for you, my boy. Accept my 'earliest felicitations!"

Defeat is the test of the great man. Your true general is not he who rides to triumph on the tide of an easy victory, but the one who, when crushed to earth, can bend himself to the task of planning methods of rising again. Such a one was Albert, the

page-boy. Observe Albert in his attic bedroom scarcely more than an hour later. His body has practically ceased to trouble him, and his soaring spirit has come into its own again. With the exception of a now very occasional spasm, his physical anguish has passed, and he is thinking, thinking hard. On the chest of drawers is a grubby envelope, addressed in an ill-formed hand to:

R. Byng, Esq.

On a sheet of paper, soon to be placed in the envelope, are written in the same hand these words:

"Do not dispare! Remember! Fante hart never won fair lady. I shall watch your futur progres with considurable interest.

Your Well-Wisher."

The last sentence is not original. Albert's Sunday-school teacher said it to Albert on the occasion of his taking up his duties at the castle, and it stuck in his memory. Fortunately, for it expressed exactly what Albert wished to say. From now on Reggie Byng's progress with Lady Maud Marsh was to be the thing nearest to Albert's heart.

And George meanwhile? Little knowing how Fate has changed in a

flash an ally into an opponent he is standing at the edge of the shrubbery near the castle gate. The night is very beautiful; the barked spots on his hands and knees are hurting much less now; and he is full of long, sweet thoughts. He has just discovered the extraordinary resemblance, which had not struck him as he was climbing up the knotted sheet, between his own position and that of the hero of Tennyson's Maud, a poem to which he has always been particularly addicted--and never more so than during the days since he learned the name of the only possible girl. When he has not been playing golf, Tennyson's Maud has been his constant companion.

"Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls

Come hither, the dances are done,

In glass of satin and glimmer of pearls.

Queen lily and rose in one;

Shine out, little head, sunning over with curls

To the flowers, and be their sun."

The music from the ballroom flows out to him through the motionless air. The smell of sweet earth and growing things is everywhere.

"Come into the garden, Maud,

For the black bat, night, hath flown,

Come into the garden, Maud,

I am here at the gate alone;

And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,

And the musk of the rose is blown."

He draws a deep breath, misled young man. The night is very beautiful. It is near to the dawn now and in the bushes live things are beginning to stir and whisper.

"Maud!"

Surely she can hear him?

"Maud!"

The silver stars looked down dispassionately. This sort of thing had no novelty for them.