

CHAPTER 15.

Lord Belpher's twenty-first birthday dawned brightly, heralded in by much twittering of sparrows in the ivy outside his bedroom. These Percy did not hear, for he was sound asleep and had had a late night. The first sound that was able to penetrate his heavy slumber and rouse him to a realization that his birthday had arrived was the piercing cry of Reggie Byng on his way to the bath-room across the corridor. It was Reggie's disturbing custom to urge himself on to a cold bath with encouraging yells; and the noise of this performance, followed by violent splashing and a series of sharp howls as the sponge played upon the Byng spine, made sleep an impossibility within a radius of many yards. Percy sat up in bed, and cursed Reggie silently. He discovered that he had a headache.

Presently the door flew open, and the vocalist entered in person, clad in a pink bathrobe and very tousled and rosy from the tub.

"Many happy returns of the day, Boots, old thing!"

Reggie burst rollickingly into song.

"I'm twenty-one today!
Twenty-one today!
I've got the key of the door!
Never been twenty-one before!"

And father says I can do what I like!

So shout Hip-hip-hooray!

I'm a jolly good fellow,

Twenty-one today."

Lord Belper scowled morosely.

"I wish you wouldn't make that infernal noise!"

"What infernal noise?"

"That singing!"

"My God! This man has wounded me!" said Reggie.

"I've a headache."

"I thought you would have, laddie, when I saw you getting away with the liquid last night. An X-ray photograph of your liver would show something that looked like a crumpled oak-leaf studded with hob-nails. You ought to take more exercise, dear heart. Except for sloshing that policeman, you haven't done anything athletic for years."

"I wish you wouldn't harp on that affair!"

Reggie sat down on the bed.

"Between ourselves, old man," he said confidentially, "I also--I myself--Reginald Byng, in person--was perhaps a shade polluted during the evening. I give you my honest word that just after dinner I saw three versions of your uncle, the bishop, standing in a row side by side. I tell you, laddie, that for a moment I thought I had strayed into a Bishop's Beano at Exeter Hall or the Athenaeum or wherever it is those chappies collect in gangs. Then the three bishops sort of congealed into one bishop, a trifle blurred about the outlines, and I felt relieved. But what convinced me that I had emptied a flagon or so too many was a rather rummy thing that occurred later on. Have you ever happened, during one of these feasts of reason and flows of soul, when you were bubbling over with joie-de-vivre--have you ever happened to see things? What I mean to say is, I had a deuced odd experience last night. I could have sworn that one of the waiter-chappies was that fellow who knocked off your hat in Piccadilly."

Lord Belpher, who had sunk back on to the pillows at Reggie's entrance and had been listening to his talk with only intermittent attention, shot up in bed.

"What!"

"Absolutely! My mistake, of course, but there it was. The fellow

might have been his double."

"But you've never seen the man."

"Oh yes, I have. I forgot to tell you. I met him on the links yesterday. I'd gone out there alone, rather expecting to have a round with the pro., but, finding this lad there, I suggested that we might go round together. We did eighteen holes, and he licked the boots off me. Very hot stuff he was. And after the game he took me off to his cottage and gave me a drink. He lives at the cottage next door to Platt's farm, so, you see, it was the identical chappie. We got extremely matey. Like brothers. Absolutely! So you can understand what a shock it gave me when I found what I took to be the same man serving bracers to the multitude the same evening. One of those nasty jars that cause a fellow's head to swim a bit, don't you know, and make him lose confidence in himself."

Lord Belpher did not reply. His brain was whirling. So he had been right after all!

"You know," pursued Reggie seriously, "I think you are making the bloomer of a lifetime over this hat-swatting chappie. You've misjudged him. He's a first-rate sort. Take it from me! Nobody could have got out of the bunker at the fifteenth hole better than he did. If you'll take my advice, you'll conciliate the feller. A really first-class golfer is what you need in the family. Besides, even

leaving out of the question the fact that he can do things with a niblick that I didn't think anybody except the pro. could do, he's a corking good sort. A stout fellow in every respect. I took to the chappie. He's all right. Grab him, Boots, before he gets away. That's my tip to you. You'll never regret it! From first to last this lad didn't fozzle a single drive, and his approach-putting has to be seen to be believed. Well, got to dress, I suppose. Mustn't waste life's springtime sitting here talking to you. Toodle-oo, laddie! We shall meet anon!"

Lord Belpher leaped from his bed. He was feeling worse than ever now, and a glance into the mirror told him that he looked rather worse than he felt. Late nights and insufficient sleep, added to the need of a shave, always made him look like something that should have been swept up and taken away to the ash-bin. And as for his physical condition, talking to Reggie Byng never tended to make you feel better when you had a headache. Reggie's manner was not soothing, and on this particular morning his choice of a topic had been unusually irritating. Lord Belpher told himself that he could not understand Reggie. He had never been able to make his mind quite clear as to the exact relations between the latter and his sister Maud, but he had always been under the impression that, if they were not actually engaged, they were on the verge of becoming so; and it was maddening to have to listen to Reggie advocating the claims of a rival as if he had no personal interest in the affair at all. Percy felt for his complaisant friend something of the

annoyance which a householder feels for the watchdog whom he finds fraternizing with the burglar. Why, Reggie, more than anyone else, ought to be foaming with rage at the insolence of this American fellow in coming down to Belpber and planting himself at the castle gates. Instead of which, on his own showing, he appeared to have adopted an attitude towards him which would have excited remark if adopted by David towards Jonathan. He seemed to spend all his spare time frolicking with the man on the golf-links and hobnobbing with him in his house.

Lord Belpber was thoroughly upset. It was impossible to prove it or to do anything about it now, but he was convinced that the fellow had wormed his way into the castle in the guise of a waiter. He had probably met Maud and plotted further meetings with her. This thing was becoming unendurable.

One thing was certain. The family honour was in his hands. Anything that was to be done to keep Maud away from the intruder must be done by himself. Reggie was hopeless: he was capable, as far as Percy could see, of escorting Maud to the fellow's door in his own car and leaving her on the threshold with his blessing. As for Lord Marshmoreton, roses and the family history took up so much of his time that he could not be counted on for anything but moral support. He, Percy, must do the active work.

He had just come to this decision, when, approaching the window and

gazing down into the grounds, he perceived his sister Maud walking rapidly--and, so it seemed to him, with a furtive air--down the east drive. And it was to the east that Platt's farm and the cottage next door to it lay.

At the moment of this discovery, Percy was in a costume ill adapted for the taking of country walks. Reggie's remarks about his liver had struck home, and it had been his intention, by way of a corrective to his headache and a general feeling of swollen ill-health, to do a little work before his bath with a pair of Indian clubs. He had arrayed himself for this purpose in an old sweater, a pair of grey flannel trousers, and patent leather evening shoes. It was not the garb he would have chosen himself for a ramble, but time was flying: even to put on a pair of boots is a matter of minutes: and in another moment or two Maud would be out of sight. Percy ran downstairs, snatched up a soft shooting-hat, which proved, too late, to belong to a person with a head two sizes smaller than his own; and raced out into the grounds. He was just in time to see Maud disappearing round the corner of the drive.

Lord Belper had never belonged to that virile class of the community which considers running a pleasure and a pastime. At Oxford, on those occasions when the members of his college had turned out on raw afternoons to trot along the river-bank encouraging the college eight with yelling and the swinging of

police-rattles, Percy had always stayed prudently in his rooms with tea and buttered toast, thereby avoiding who knows what colds and coughs. When he ran, he ran reluctantly and with a definite object in view, such as the catching of a train. He was consequently not in the best of condition, and the sharp sprint which was imperative at this juncture if he was to keep his sister in view left him spent and panting. But he had the reward of reaching the gates of the drive not many seconds after Maud, and of seeing her walking--more slowly now--down the road that led to Platt's. This confirmation of his suspicions enabled him momentarily to forget the blister which was forming on the heel of his left foot. He set out after her at a good pace.

The road, after the habit of country roads, wound and twisted. The quarry was frequently out of sight. And Percy's anxiety was such that, every time Maud vanished, he broke into a gallop. Another hundred yards, and the blister no longer consented to be ignored. It cried for attention like a little child, and was rapidly insinuating itself into a position in the scheme of things where it threatened to become the centre of the world. By the time the third bend in the road was reached, it seemed to Percy that this blister had become the one great Fact in an unreal nightmare-like universe. He hobbled painfully: and when he stopped suddenly and darted back into the shelter of the hedge his foot seemed aflame. The only reason why the blister on his left heel did not at this juncture attract his entire attention was that he had become aware that

there was another of equal proportions forming on his right heel.

Percy had stopped and sought cover in the hedge because, as he rounded the bend in the road, he perceived, before he had time to check his gallop, that Maud had also stopped. She was standing in the middle of the road, looking over her shoulder, not ten yards away. Had she seen him? It was a point that time alone could solve. No! She walked on again. She had not seen him. Lord Belper, by means of a notable triumph of mind over matter, forgot the blisters and hurried after her.

They had now reached that point in the road where three choices offer themselves to the wayfarer. By going straight on he may win through to the village of Moresby-in-the-Vale, a charming little place with a Norman church; by turning to the left he may visit the equally seductive hamlet of Little Weeting; by turning to the right off the main road and going down a leafy lane he may find himself at the door of Platt's farm. When Maud, reaching the cross-roads, suddenly swung down the one to the left, Lord Belper was for the moment completely baffled. Reason reasserted its way the next minute, telling him that this was but a ruse. Whether or no she had caught sight of him, there was no doubt that Maud intended to shake off any possible pursuit by taking this speciously innocent turning and making a detour. She could have no possible motive in going to Little Weeting. He had never been to Little Weeting in his life, and there was no reason to suppose that Maud had either.

The sign-post informed him--a statement strenuously denied by the twin-blisters--that the distance to Little Weeting was one and a half miles. Lord Belpher's view of it was that it was nearer fifty. He dragged himself along wearily. It was simpler now to keep Maud in sight, for the road ran straight: but, there being a catch in everything in this world, the process was also messier. In order to avoid being seen, it was necessary for Percy to leave the road and tramp along in the deep ditch which ran parallel to it. There is nothing half-hearted about these ditches which accompany English country roads. They know they are intended to be ditches, not mere furrows, and they behave as such. The one that sheltered Lord Belpher was so deep that only his head and neck protruded above the level of the road, and so dirty that a bare twenty yards of travel was sufficient to coat him with mud. Rain, once fallen, is reluctant to leave the English ditch. It nestles inside it for weeks, forming a rich, oatmeal-like substance which has to be stirred to be believed. Percy stirred it. He churned it. He ploughed and sloshed through it. The mud stuck to him like a brother.

Nevertheless, being a determined young man, he did not give in. Once he lost a shoe, but a little searching recovered that. On another occasion, a passing dog, seeing things going on in the ditch which in his opinion should not have been going on--he was a high-strung dog, unused to coming upon heads moving along the road

without bodies attached--accompanied Percy for over a quarter of a mile, causing him exquisite discomfort by making sudden runs at his face. A well-aimed stone settled this little misunderstanding, and Percy proceeded on his journey alone. He had Maud well in view when, to his surprise, she left the road and turned into the gate of a house which stood not far from the church.

Lord Belper regained the road, and remained there, a puzzled man. A dreadful thought came to him that he might have had all this trouble and anguish for no reason. This house bore the unmistakable stamp of a vicarage. Maud could have no reason that was not innocent for going there. Had he gone through all this, merely to see his sister paying a visit to a clergyman? Too late it occurred to him that she might quite easily be on visiting terms with the clergy of Little Weeting. He had forgotten that he had been away at Oxford for many weeks, a period of time in which Maud, finding life in the country weigh upon her, might easily have interested herself charitably in the life of this village. He paused irresolutely. He was baffled.

Maud, meanwhile, had rung the bell. Ever since, looking over her shoulder, she had perceived her brother Percy dodging about in the background, her active young mind had been busying itself with schemes for throwing him off the trail. She must see George that morning. She could not wait another day before establishing communication between herself and Geoffrey. But it was not till she

reached Little Weeting that there occurred to her any plan that promised success.

A trim maid opened the door.

"Is the vicar in?"

"No, miss. He went out half an hour back."

Maud was as baffled for the moment as her brother Percy, now leaning against the vicarage wall in a state of advanced exhaustion.

"Oh, dear!" she said.

The maid was sympathetic.

"Mr. Ferguson, the curate, miss, he's here, if he would do."

Maud brightened.

"He would do splendidly. Will you ask him if I can see him for a moment?"

"Very well, miss. What name, please?"

"He won't know my name. Will you please tell him that a lady wishes to see him?"

"Yes, miss. Won't you step in?"

The front door closed behind Maud. She followed the maid into the drawing-room. Presently a young small curate entered. He had a willing, benevolent face. He looked alert and helpful.

"You wished to see me?"

"I am so sorry to trouble you," said Maud, rocking the young man in his tracks with a smile of dazzling brilliancy--("No trouble, I assure you," said the curate dizzily)--"but there is a man following me!"

The curate clicked his tongue indignantly.

"A rough sort of a tramp kind of man. He has been following me for miles, and I'm frightened."

"Brute!"

"I think he's outside now. I can't think what he wants. Would you--would you mind being kind enough to go and send him away?"

The eyes that had settled George's fate for all eternity flashed upon the curate, who blinked. He squared his shoulders and drew himself up. He was perfectly willing to die for her.

"If you will wait here," he said, "I will go and send him about his business. It is disgraceful that the public highways should be rendered unsafe in this manner."

"Thank you ever so much," said Maud gratefully. "I can't help thinking the poor fellow may be a little crazy. It seems so odd of him to follow me all that way. Walking in the ditch too!"

"Walking in the ditch!"

"Yes. He walked most of the way in the ditch at the side of the road. He seemed to prefer it. I can't think why."

Lord Belpher, leaning against the wall and trying to decide whether his right or left foot hurt him the more excruciatingly, became aware that a curate was standing before him, regarding him through a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez with a disapproving and hostile expression. Lord Belpher returned his gaze. Neither was favourably impressed by the other. Percy thought he had seen nicer-looking curates, and the curate thought he had seen more prepossessing tramps.

"Come, come!" said the curate. "This won't do, my man!" A few hours earlier Lord Belpher had been startled when addressed by George as "sir". To be called "my man" took his breath away completely.

The gift of seeing ourselves as others see us is, as the poet indicates, vouchsafed to few men. Lord Belpher, not being one of these fortunates, had not the slightest conception how intensely revolting his personal appearance was at that moment. The red-rimmed eyes, the growth of stubble on the cheeks, and the thick coating of mud which had resulted from his rambles in the ditch combined to render him a horrifying object.

"How dare you follow that young lady? I've a good mind to give you in charge!"

Percy was outraged.

"I'm her brother!" He was about to substantiate the statement by giving his name, but stopped himself. He had had enough of letting his name come out on occasions like the present. When the policeman had arrested him in the Haymarket, his first act had been to thunder his identity at the man: and the policeman, without saying in so many words that he disbelieved him, had hinted scepticism by replying that he himself was the king of Brixton.

"I'm her brother!" he repeated thickly.

The curate's disapproval deepened. In a sense, we are all brothers; but that did not prevent him from considering that this mud-stained derelict had made an impudent and abominable mis-statement of fact. Not unnaturally he came to the conclusion that he had to do with a victim of the Demon Rum.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he said severely. "Sad piece of human wreckage as you are, you speak like an educated man. Have you no self-respect? Do you never search your heart and shudder at the horrible degradation which you have brought on yourself by sheer weakness of will?"

He raise his voice. The subject of Temperance was one very near to the curate's heart. The vicar himself had complimented him only yesterday on the good his sermons against the drink evil were doing in the village, and the landlord of the Three Pigeons down the road had on several occasions spoken bitter things about blighters who came taking the living away from honest folks.

"It is easy enough to stop if you will but use a little resolution. You say to yourself, 'Just one won't hurt me!' Perhaps not. But can you be content with just one? Ah! No, my man, there is no middle way for such as you. It must be all or nothing. Stop it now--now, while you still retain some semblance of humanity. Soon it will be too late! Kill that craving! Stifle it! Strangle it! Make up your mind now--now, that not another drop of the accursed stuff

shall pass your lips... ."

The curate paused. He perceived that enthusiasm was leading him away from the main issue. "A little perseverance," he concluded rapidly, "and you will soon find that cocoa gives you exactly the same pleasure. And now will you please be getting along. You have frightened the young lady, and she cannot continue her walk unless I assure her that you have gone away."

Fatigue, pain and the annoyance of having to listen to this man's well-meant but ill-judged utterances had combined to induce in Percy a condition bordering on hysteria. He stamped his foot, and uttered a howl as the blister warned him with a sharp twinge that this sort of behaviour could not be permitted.

"Stop talking!" he bellowed. "Stop talking like an idiot! I'm going to stay here till that girl comes out, if have to wait all day!"

The curate regarded Percy thoughtfully. Percy was no Hercules: but then, neither was the curate. And in any case, though no Hercules, Percy was undeniably an ugly-looking brute. Strategy, rather than force, seemed to the curate to be indicated. He paused a while, as one who weighs pros and cons, then spoke briskly, with the air of the man who has decided to yield a point with a good grace.

"Dear, dear!" he said. "That won't do! You say you are this young

lady's brother?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Then perhaps you had better come with me into the house and we will speak to her."

"All right."

"Follow me."

Percy followed him. Down the trim gravel walk they passed, and up the neat stone steps. Maud, peeping through the curtains, thought herself the victim of a monstrous betrayal or equally monstrous blunder. But she did not know the Rev. Cyril Ferguson. No general, adroitly leading the enemy on by strategic retreat, ever had a situation more thoroughly in hand. Passing with his companion through the open door, he crossed the hall to another door, discreetly closed.

"Wait in here," he said. Lord Belpher moved unsuspectingly forward. A hand pressed sharply against the small of his back. Behind him a door slammed and a key clicked. He was trapped. Groping in Egyptian darkness, his hands met a coat, then a hat, then an umbrella. Then he stumbled over a golf-club and fell against a wall. It was too dark to see anything, but his sense of touch told

him all he needed to know. He had been added to the vicar's collection of odds and ends in the closet reserved for that purpose.

He groped his way to the door and kicked it. He did not repeat the performance. His feet were in no shape for kicking things.

Percy's gallant soul abandoned the struggle. With a feeble oath, he sat down on a box containing croquet implements, and gave himself up to thought.

"You'll be quite safe now," the curate was saying in the adjoining room, not without a touch of complacent self-approval such as becomes the victor in a battle of wits. "I have locked him in the cupboard. He will be quite happy there." An incorrect statement this. "You may now continue your walk in perfect safety."

"Thank you ever so much," said Maud. "But I do hope he won't be violent when you let him out."

"I shall not let him out," replied the curate, who, though brave, was not rash. "I shall depute the task to a worthy fellow named Willis, in whom I shall have every confidence. He--he is, in fact, our local blacksmith!"

And so it came about that when, after a vigil that seemed to last

for a lifetime, Percy heard the key turn in the lock and burst forth seeking whom he might devour, he experienced an almost instant quieting of his excited nervous system. Confronting him was a vast man whose muscles, like those of that other and more celebrated village blacksmith, were plainly as strong as iron bands.

This man eyed Percy with a chilly eye.

"Well," he said. "What's troublin' you?"

Percy gulped. The man's mere appearance was a sedative.

"Er--nothing!" he replied. "Nothing!"

"There better hadn't be!" said the man darkly. "Mr. Ferguson give me this to give to you. Take it!"

Percy took it. It was a shilling.

"And this."

The second gift was a small paper pamphlet. It was entitled "Now's the Time!" and seemed to be a story of some kind. At any rate, Percy's eyes, before they began to swim in a manner that prevented steady reading, caught the words "Job Roberts had always been a

hard-drinking man, but one day, as he was coming out of the bar-parlour . . ." He was about to hurl it from him, when he met the other's eye and desisted. Rarely had Lord Belpher encountered a man with a more speaking eye.

"And now you get along," said the man. "You pop off. And I'm going to watch you do it, too. And, if I find you sneakin' off to the Three Pigeons . . ."

His pause was more eloquent than his speech and nearly as eloquent as his eye. Lord Belpher tucked the tract into his sweater, pocketed the shilling, and left the house. For nearly a mile down the well-remembered highway he was aware of a Presence in his rear, but he continued on his way without a glance behind.

"Like one that on a lonely road
Doth walk in fear and dread;
And, having once looked back, walks on
And turns no more his head!
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread!"

Maud made her way across the fields to the cottage down by Platt's. Her heart was as light as the breeze that ruffled the green hedges. Gaily she tripped towards the cottage door. Her hand was just raised to knock, when from within came the sound of a well-known

voice.

She had reached her goal, but her father had anticipated her. Lord Marshmoreton had selected the same moment as herself for paying a call upon George Bevan.

Maud tiptoed away, and hurried back to the castle. Never before had she so clearly realized what a handicap an adhesive family can be to a young girl.