CHAPTER 16.

At the moment of Lord Marshmoreton's arrival, George was reading a letter from Billie Dore, which had come by that morning's post. It dealt mainly with the vicissitudes experienced by Miss Dore's friend, Miss Sinclair, in her relations with the man Spenser Gray. Spenser Gray, it seemed, had been behaving oddly. Ardent towards Miss Sinclair almost to an embarrassing point in the early stages of their acquaintance, he had suddenly cooled; at a recent lunch had behaved with a strange aloofness; and now, at this writing, had vanished altogether, leaving nothing behind him but an abrupt note to the effect that he had been compelled to go abroad and that, much as it was to be regretted, he and she would probably never meet again.

"And if," wrote Miss Dore, justifiably annoyed, "after saying all those things to the poor kid and telling her she was the only thing in sight, he thinks he can just slide off with a 'Good-bye! Good luck! and God bless you!' he's got another guess coming. And that's not all. He hasn't gone abroad! I saw him in Piccadilly this afternoon. He saw me, too, and what do you think he did? Ducked down a side-street, if you please. He must have run like a rabbit, at that, because, when I got there, he was nowhere to be seen. I tell you, George, there's something funny about all this."

Having been made once or twice before the confidant of the

tempestuous romances of Billie's friends, which always seemed to go wrong somewhere in the middle and to die a natural death before arriving at any definite point, George was not particularly interested, except in so far as the letter afforded rather comforting evidence that he was not the only person in the world who was having trouble of the kind. He skimmed through the rest of it, and had just finished when there was a sharp rap at the front door.

"Come in!" called George.

There entered a sturdy little man of middle age whom at first sight George could not place. And yet he had the impression that he had seen him before. Then he recognized him as the gardener to whom he had given the note for Maud that day at the castle. The alteration in the man's costume was what had momentarily baffled George. When they had met in the rose-garden, the other had been arrayed in untidy gardening clothes. Now, presumably in his Sunday suit, it was amusing to observe how almost dapper he had become. Really, you might have passed him in the lane and taken him for some neighbouring squire.

George's heart raced. Your lover is ever optimistic, and he could conceive of no errand that could have brought this man to his cottage unless he was charged with the delivery of a note from Maud. He spared a moment from his happiness to congratulate himself on having picked such an admirable go-between. Here evidently, was

one of those trusty old retainers you read about, faithful, willing, discreet, ready to do anything for "the little missy" (bless her heart!). Probably he had danced Maud on his knee in her infancy, and with a dog-like affection had watched her at her childish sports. George beamed at the honest fellow, and felt in his pocket to make sure that a suitable tip lay safely therein.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," replied the man.

A purist might have said he spoke gruffly and without geniality. But that is the beauty of these old retainers. They make a point of deliberately trying to deceive strangers as to the goldenness of their hearts by adopting a forbidding manner. And "Good morning!" Not "Good morning, sir!" Sturdy independence, you observe, as befits a free man. George closed the door carefully. He glanced into the kitchen. Mrs. Platt was not there. All was well.

"You have brought a note from Lady Maud?"

The honest fellow's rather dour expression seemed to grow a shade bleaker.

"If you are alluding to Lady Maud Marsh, my daughter," he replied frostily, "I have not!"

For the past few days George had been no stranger to shocks, and had indeed come almost to regard them as part of the normal everyday life; but this latest one had a stumbling effect.

"I beg your pardon?" he said.

"So you ought to," replied the earl.

George swallowed once or twice to relieve a curious dryness of the mouth.

"Are you Lord Marshmoreton?"

"I am."

"Good Lord!"

"You seem surprised."

"It's nothing!" muttered George. "At least, you--I mean to say . . . It's only that there's a curious resemblance between you and one of your gardeners at the castle. I--I daresay you have noticed it yourself."

"My hobby is gardening."

Light broke upon George. "Then was it really you--?"

"It was!"

George sat down. "This opens up a new line of thought!" he said.

Lord Marshmoreton remained standing. He shook his head sternly.

"It won't do, Mr. . . . I have never heard your name."

"Bevan," replied George, rather relieved at being able to remember it in the midst of his mental turmoil.

"It won't do, Mr. Bevan. It must stop. I allude to this absurd entanglement between yourself and my daughter. It must stop at once."

It seemed to George that such an entanglement could hardly be said to have begun, but he did not say so.

Lord Marshmoreton resumed his remarks. Lady Caroline had sent him to the cottage to be stern, and his firm resolve to be stern lent his style of speech something of the measured solemnity and careful phrasing of his occasional orations in the House of Lords.

"I have no wish to be unduly hard upon the indiscretions of Youth. Youth is the period of Romance, when the heart rules the head. I myself was once a young man."

"Well, you're practically that now," said George.

"Eh?" cried Lord Marshmoreton, forgetting the thread of his discourse in the shock of pleased surprise.

"You don't look a day over forty."

"Oh, come, come, my boy! . . . I mean, Mr. Bevan."

"You don't honestly."

"I'm forty-eight."

"The Prime of Life."

"And you don't think I look it?"

"You certainly don't."

"Well, well, well! By the way, have you tobacco, my boy. I came without my pouch."

"Just at your elbow. Pretty good stuff. I bought it in the village."

"The same I smoke myself."

"Quite a coincidence."

"Distinctly."

"Match?"

"Thank you, I have one."

George filled his own pipe. The thing was becoming a love-feast.

"What was I saying?" said Lord Marshmoreton, blowing a comfortable cloud. "Oh, yes." He removed his pipe from his mouth with a touch of embarrassment. "Yes, yes, to be sure!"

There was an awkward silence.

"You must see for yourself," said the earl, "how impossible it is."

George shook his head.

"I may be slow at grasping a thing, but I'm bound to say I can't see that."

Lord Marshmoreton recalled some of the things his sister had told him to say. "For one thing, what do we know of you? You are a perfect stranger."

"Well, we're all getting acquainted pretty quick, don't you think? I met your son in Piccadilly and had a long talk with him, and now you are paying me a neighbourly visit."

"This was not intended to be a social call."

"But it has become one."

"And then, that is one point I wish to make, you know. Ours is an old family, I would like to remind you that there were Marshmoretons in Belpher before the War of the Roses."

"There were Bevans in Brooklyn before the B.R.T."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I was only pointing out that I can trace my ancestry a long way. You have to trace things a long way in Brooklyn, if you want to find them."

"I have never heard of Brooklyn."

"You've heard of New York?"

"Certainly."

"New York's one of the outlying suburbs."

Lord Marshmoreton relit his pipe. He had a feeling that they were wandering from the point.

"It is quite impossible."

"I can't see it."

"Maud is so young."

"Your daughter could be nothing else."

"Too young to know her own mind," pursued Lord Marshmoreton, resolutely crushing down a flutter of pleasure. There was no doubt that this singularly agreeable man was making things very difficult for him. It was disarming to discover that he was really capital company--the best, indeed, that the earl could remember to have discovered in the more recent period of his rather lonely life. "At present, of course, she fancies that she is very much in love with you . . . It is absurd!"

"You needn't tell me that," said George. Really, it was only the fact that people seemed to go out of their way to call at his cottage and tell him that Maud loved him that kept him from feeling his cause perfectly hopeless. "It's incredible. It's a miracle."

"You are a romantic young man, and you no doubt for the moment suppose that you are in love with her."

"No!" George was not going to allow a remark like that to pass unchallenged. "You are wrong there. As far as I am concerned, there is no question of its being momentary or supposititious or anything of that kind. I am in love with your daughter. I was from the first moment I saw her. I always shall be. She is the only girl in the world!"

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"Not at all. Absolute, cold fact."

"You have known her so little time."

"Long enough."

Lord Marshmoreton sighed. "You are upsetting things terribly."

"Things are upsetting me terribly."

"You are causing a great deal of trouble and annoyance."

"So did Romeo."

"Eh?"

"I said--So did Romeo."

"I don't know anything about Romeo."

"As far as love is concerned, I begin where he left off."

"I wish I could persuade you to be sensible."

"That's just what I think I am."

"I wish I could get you to see my point of view."

"I do see your point of view. But dimly. You see, my own takes up such a lot of the foreground."

There was a pause.

"Then I am afraid," said Lord Marshmoreton, "that we must leave

matters as they stand."

"Until they can be altered for the better."

"We will say no more about it now."

"Very well."

"But I must ask you to understand clearly that I shall have to do everything in my power to stop what I look on as an unfortunate entanglement."

"I understand,"

"Very well."

Lord Marshmoreton coughed. George looked at him with some surprise. He had supposed the interview to be at an end, but the other made no move to go. There seemed to be something on the earl's mind.

"There is--ah--just one other thing," said Lord Marshmoreton. He coughed again. He felt embarrassed. "Just--just one other thing," he repeated.

The reason for Lord Marshmoreton's visit to George had been twofold. In the first place, Lady Caroline had told him to go.

That would have been reason enough. But what made the visit imperative was an unfortunate accident of which he had only that morning been made aware.

It will be remembered that Billie Dore had told George that the gardener with whom she had become so friendly had taken her name and address with a view later on to send her some of his roses. The scrap of paper on which this information had been written was now lost. Lord Marshmoreton had been hunting for it since breakfast without avail.

Billie Dore had made a decided impression upon Lord Marshmoreton. She belonged to a type which he had never before encountered, and it was one which he had found more than agreeable. Her knowledge of roses and the proper feeling which she manifested towards rose-growing as a life-work consolidated the earl's liking for her. Never, in his memory, had he come across so sensible and charming a girl; and he had looked forward with a singular intensity to meeting her again. And now some too zealous housemaid, tidying up after the irritating manner of her species, had destroyed the only clue to her identity.

It was not for some time after this discovery that hope dawned again for Lord Marshmoreton. Only after he had given up the search for the missing paper as fruitless did he recall that it was in George's company that Billie had first come into his life. Between

her, then, and himself George was the only link.

It was primarily for the purpose of getting Billie's name and address from George that he had come to the cottage. And now that the moment had arrived for touching upon the subject, he felt a little embarrassed.

"When you visited the castle," he said, "when you visited the castle . . ."

"Last Thursday," said George helpfully.

"Exactly. When you visited the castle last Thursday, there was a young lady with you."

Not realizing that the subject had been changed, George was under the impression that the other had shifted his front and was about to attack him from another angle. He countered what seemed to him an insinuation stoutly.

"We merely happened to meet at the castle. She came there quite independently of me."

Lord Marshmoreton looked alarmed. "You didn't know her?" he said anxiously.

"Certainly I knew her. She is an old friend of mine. But if you are hinting . . ."

"Not at all," rejoined the earl, profoundly relieved. "Not at all. I ask merely because this young lady, with whom I had some conversation, was good enough to give me her name and address. She, too, happened to mistake me for a gardener."

"It's those corduroy trousers," murmured George in extenuation.

"I have unfortunately lost them."

"You can always get another pair."

"Eh?"

"I say you can always get another pair of corduroy trousers."

"I have not lost my trousers. I have lost the young lady's name and address."

"Oh!"

"I promised to send her some roses. She will be expecting them."

"That's odd. I was just reading a letter from her when you came in.

That must be what she's referring to when she says, 'If you see dadda, the old dear, tell him not to forget my roses.' I read it three times and couldn't make any sense out of it. Are you Dadda?"

The earl smirked. "She did address me in the course of our conversation as dadda."

"Then the message is for you."

"A very quaint and charming girl. What is her name? And where can I find her?"

"Her name's Billie Dore."

"Billie?"

"Billie."

"Billie!" said Lord Marshmoreton softly. "I had better write it down. And her address?"

"I don't know her private address. But you could always reach her at the Regal Theatre."

"Ah! She is on the stage?"

"Yes. She's in my piece, 'Follow the Girl'."

"Indeed! Are you a playwright, Mr. Bevan?"

"Good Lord, no!" said George, shocked. "I'm a composer."

"Very interesting. And you met Miss Dore through her being in this play of yours?"

"Oh, no. I knew her before she went on the stage. She was a stenographer in a music-publisher's office when we first met."

"Good gracious! Was she really a stenographer?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh--ah--nothing, nothing. Something just happened to come to my mind."

What happened to come into Lord Marshmoreton's mind was a fleeting vision of Billie installed in Miss Alice Faraday's place as his secretary. With such a helper it would be a pleasure to work on that infernal Family History which was now such a bitter toil. But the day-dream passed. He knew perfectly well that he had not the courage to dismiss Alice. In the hands of that calm-eyed girl he was as putty. She exercised over him the hypnotic spell a

lion-tamer exercises over his little playmates.

"We have been pals for years," said George "Billie is one of the best fellows in the world."

"A charming girl."

"She would give her last nickel to anyone that asked for it."

"Delightful!"

"And as straight as a string. No one ever said a word against Billie."

"No?"

"She may go out to lunch and supper and all that kind of thing, but there's nothing to that."

"Nothing!" agreed the earl warmly. "Girls must eat!"

"They do. You ought to see them."

"A little harmless relaxation after the fatigue of the day!"

"Exactly. Nothing more."

Lord Marshmoreton felt more drawn than ever to this sensible young man--sensible, at least, on all points but one. It was a pity they could not see eye to eye on what was and what was not suitable in the matter of the love-affairs of the aristocracy.

"So you are a composer, Mr. Bevan?" he said affably.

"Yes."

Lord Marshmoreton gave a little sigh. "It's a long time since I went to see a musical performance. More than twenty years. When I was up at Oxford, and for some years afterwards, I was a great theatre-goer. Never used to miss a first night at the Gaiety. Those were the days of Nellie Farren and Kate Vaughan. Florence St. John, too. How excellent she was in Faust Up To Date! But we missed Nellie Farren. Meyer Lutz was the Gaiety composer then. But a good deal of water has flowed under the bridge since those days. I don't suppose you have ever heard of Meyer Lutz?"

"I don't think I have."

"Johnnie Toole was playing a piece called Partners. Not a good play. And the Yeoman of the Guard had just been produced at the Savoy. That makes it seem a long time ago, doesn't it? Well, I mustn't take up all your time. Good-bye, Mr. Bevan. I am glad to

have had the opportunity of this little talk. The Regal Theatre, I think you said, is where your piece is playing? I shall probably be going to London shortly. I hope to see it." Lord Marshmoreton rose. "As regards the other matter, there is no hope of inducing you to see the matter in the right light?"

"We seem to disagree as to which is the right light."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. I will be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Bevan. I like you . . ."

"The feeling is quite mutual."

"But I don't want you as a son-in-law. And, dammit," exploded Lord Marshmoreton, "I won't have you as a son-in-law! Good God! do you think that you can harry and assault my son Percy in the heart of Piccadilly and generally make yourself a damned nuisance and then settle down here without an invitation at my very gates and expect to be welcomed into the bosom of the family? If I were a young man . . ."

"I thought we had agreed that you were a young man."

"Don't interrupt me!"

"I only said . . ."

"I heard what you said. Flattery!"

"Nothing of the kind. Truth."

Lord Marshmoreton melted. He smiled. "Young idiot!"

"We agree there all right."

Lord Marshmoreton hesitated. Then with a rush he unbosomed himself, and made his own position on the matter clear.

"I know what you'll be saying to yourself the moment my back is turned. You'll be calling me a stage heavy father and an old snob and a number of other things. Don't interrupt me, dammit! You will, I tell you! And you'll be wrong. I don't think the Marshmoretons are fenced off from the rest of the world by some sort of divinity. My sister does. Percy does. But Percy's an ass! If ever you find yourself thinking differently from my son Percy, on any subject, congratulate yourself. You'll be right."

"But . . ."

"I know what you're going to say. Let me finish. If I were the only person concerned, I wouldn't stand in Maud's way, whoever she wanted to marry, provided he was a good fellow and likely to make

her happy. But I'm not. There's my sister Caroline. There's a whole crowd of silly, cackling fools--my sisters--my sons-in-law--all the whole pack of them! If I didn't oppose Maud in this damned infatuation she's got for you--if I stood by and let her marry you--what do you think would happen to me?--I'd never have a moment's peace! The whole gabbling pack of them would be at me, saying I was to blame. There would be arguments, discussions, family councils! I hate arguments! I loathe discussions! Family councils make me sick! I'm a peaceable man, and I like a quiet life! And, damme, I'm going to have it. So there's the thing for you in letters of one syllable. I don't object to you personally, but I'm not going to have you bothering me like this. I'll admit freely that, since I have made your acquaintance, I have altered the unfavourable opinion I had formed of you from--from hearsay. . ."

"Exactly the same with me," said George. "You ought never to believe what people tell you. Everyone told me your middle name was Nero, and that. . ."

"Don't interrupt me!"

"I wasn't. I was just pointing out . . ."

"Be quiet! I say I have changed my opinion of you to a great extent. I mention this unofficially, as a matter that has no bearing on the main issue; for, as regards any idea you may have of

inducing me to agree to your marrying my daughter, let me tell you that I am unalterably opposed to any such thing!"

"Don't say that."

"What the devil do you mean--don't say that! I do say that! It is out of the question. Do you understand? Very well, then. Good morning."

The door closed. Lord Marshmoreton walked away feeling that he had been commendably stern. George filled his pipe and sat smoking thoughtfully. He wondered what Maud was doing at that moment.

Maud at that moment was greeting her brother with a bright smile, as he limped downstairs after a belated shave and change of costume.

"Oh, Percy, dear," she was saying, "I had quite an adventure this morning. An awful tramp followed me for miles! Such a horrible-looking brute. I was so frightened that I had to ask a curate in the next village to drive him away. I did wish I had had you there to protect me. Why don't you come out with me sometimes when I take a country walk? It really isn't safe for me to be alone!"