

CHAPTER 17.

The gift of hiding private emotion and keeping up appearances before strangers is not, as many suppose, entirely a product of our modern civilization. Centuries before we were born or thought of there was a widely press-agented boy in Sparta who even went so far as to let a fox gnaw his tender young stomach without permitting the discomfort inseparable from such a proceeding to interfere with either his facial expression or his flow of small talk. Historians have handed it down that, even in the later stages of the meal, the polite lad continued to be the life and soul of the party. But, while this feat may be said to have established a record never subsequently lowered, there is no doubt that almost every day in modern times men and women are performing similar and scarcely less impressive miracles of self-restraint. Of all the qualities which belong exclusively to Man and are not shared by the lower animals, this surely is the one which marks him off most sharply from the beasts of the field. Animals care nothing about keeping up appearances. Observe Bertram the Bull when things are not going just as he could wish. He stamps. He snorts. He paws the ground. He throws back his head and bellows. He is upset, and he doesn't care who knows it. Instances could be readily multiplied. Deposit a charge of shot in some outlying section of Thomas the Tiger, and note the effect. Irritate Wilfred the Wasp, or stand behind Maud the Mule and prod her with a pin. There is not an animal on the

list who has even a rudimentary sense of the social amenities; and it is this more than anything else which should make us proud that we are human beings on a loftier plane of development.

In the days which followed Lord Marshmoreton's visit to George at the cottage, not a few of the occupants of Belper Castle had their mettle sternly tested in this respect; and it is a pleasure to be able to record that not one of them failed to come through the ordeal with success. The general public, as represented by the uncles, cousins, and aunts who had descended on the place to help Lord Belper celebrate his coming-of-age, had not a notion that turmoil lurked behind the smooth fronts of at least half a dozen of those whom they met in the course of the daily round.

Lord Belper, for example, though he limped rather painfully, showed nothing of the baffled fury which was reducing his weight at the rate of ounces a day. His uncle Francis, the Bishop, when he tackled him in the garden on the subject of Intemperance--for Uncle Francis, like thousands of others, had taken it for granted, on reading the report of the encounter with the policeman and Percy's subsequent arrest, that the affair had been the result of a drunken outburst--had no inkling of the volcanic emotions that seethed in his nephew's bosom. He came away from the interview, indeed, feeling that the boy had listened attentively and with a becoming regret, and that there was hope for him after all, provided that he fought the impulse. He little knew that, but for the conventions

(which frown on the practice of murdering bishops), Percy would gladly have strangled him with his bare hands and jumped upon the remains.

Lord Belpher's case, inasmuch as he took himself extremely seriously and was not one of those who can extract humour even from their own misfortunes, was perhaps the hardest which comes under our notice; but his sister Maud was also experiencing mental disquietude of no mean order. Everything had gone wrong with Maud. Barely a mile separated her from George, that essential link in her chain of communication with Geoffrey Raymond; but so thickly did it bristle with obstacles and dangers that it might have been a mile of No Man's Land. Twice, since the occasion when the discovery of Lord Marshmoreton at the cottage had caused her to abandon her purpose of going in and explaining everything to George, had she attempted to make the journey; and each time some trifling, maddening accident had brought about failure. Once, just as she was starting, her aunt Augusta had insisted on joining her for what she described as "a nice long walk"; and the second time, when she was within a bare hundred yards of her objective, some sort of a cousin popped out from nowhere and forced his loathsome company on her.

Foiled in this fashion, she had fallen back in desperation on her second line of attack. She had written a note to George, explaining the whole situation in good, clear phrases and begging him as a man of proved chivalry to help her. It had taken up much of one

afternoon, this note, for it was not easy to write; and it had resulted in nothing. She had given it to Albert to deliver and Albert had returned empty-handed.

"The gentleman said there was no answer, m'lady!"

"No answer! But there must be an answer!"

"No answer, m'lady. Those was his very words," stoutly maintained the black-souled boy, who had destroyed the letter within two minutes after it had been handed to him. He had not even bothered to read it. A deep, dangerous, dastardly stripling this, who fought to win and only to win. The ticket marked "R. Byng" was in his pocket, and in his ruthless heart a firm resolve that R. Byng and no other should have the benefit of his assistance.

Maud could not understand it. That is to say, she resolutely kept herself from accepting the only explanation of the episode that seemed possible. In black and white she had asked George to go to London and see Geoffrey and arrange for the passage--through himself as a sort of clearing-house--of letters between Geoffrey and herself. She had felt from the first that such a request should be made by her in person and not through the medium of writing, but surely it was incredible that a man like George, who had been through so much for her and whose only reason for being in the neighbourhood was to help her, could have coldly refused without

even a word. And yet what else was she to think? Now, more than ever, she felt alone in a hostile world.

Yet, to her guests she was bright and entertaining. Not one of them had a suspicion that her life was not one of pure sunshine.

Albert, I am happy to say, was thoroughly miserable. The little brute was suffering torments. He was showering anonymous Advice to the Lovelorn on Reggie Byng--excellent stuff, culled from the pages of weekly papers, of which there was a pile in the housekeeper's room, the property of a sentimental lady's maid--and nothing seemed to come of it. Every day, sometimes twice and thrice a day, he would leave on Reggie's dressing-table significant notes similar in tone to the one which he had placed there on the night of the ball; but, for all the effect they appeared to exercise on their recipient, they might have been blank pages.

The choicest quotations from the works of such established writers as "Aunt Charlotte" of Forget-Me-Not and "Doctor Cupid", the heart-expert of Home Chat, expended themselves fruitlessly on Reggie. As far as Albert could ascertain--and he was one of those boys who ascertain practically everything within a radius of miles--Reggie positively avoided Maud's society.

And this after reading "Doctor Cupid's" invaluable tip about "Seeking her company on all occasions" and the dictum of "Aunt

Charlotte" to the effect that "Many a wooer has won his lady by being persistent"--Albert spelled it "persistuent" but the effect is the same--"and rendering himself indispensable by constant little attentions". So far from rendering himself indispensable to Maud by constant little attentions, Reggie, to the disgust of his backer and supporter, seemed to spend most of his time with Alice Faraday. On three separate occasions had Albert been revolted by the sight of his protege in close association with the Faraday girl--once in a boat on the lake and twice in his grey car. It was enough to break a boy's heart; and it completely spoiled Albert's appetite--a phenomenon attributed, I am glad to say, in the Servants' Hall to reaction from recent excesses. The moment when Keggs, the butler, called him a greedy little pig and hoped it would be a lesson to him not to stuff himself at all hours with stolen cakes was a bitter moment for Albert.

It is a relief to turn from the contemplation of these tortured souls to the pleasanter picture presented by Lord Marshmoreton. Here, undeniably, we have a man without a secret sorrow, a man at peace with this best of all possible worlds. Since his visit to George a second youth seems to have come upon Lord Marshmoreton. He works in his rose-garden with a new vim, whistling or even singing to himself stray gay snatches of melodies popular in the 'eighties.

Hear him now as he toils. He has a long garden-implement in his hand, and he is sending up the death-rate in slug circles with a

devastating rapidity.

"Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay

Ta-ra-ra BOOM--"

And the boom is a death-knell. As it rings softly out on the pleasant spring air, another stout slug has made the Great Change.

It is peculiar, this gaiety. It gives one to think. Others have noticed it, his lordship's valet amongst them.

"I give you my honest word, Mr. Keggs," says the valet, awed, "this very morning I 'eard the old devil a-singing in 'is barth! Chirruping away like a blooming linnet!"

"Lor!" says Keggs, properly impressed.

"And only last night 'e gave me 'arf a box of cigars and said I was a good, faithful feller! I tell you, there's somethin' happened to the old buster--you mark my words!"