CHAPTER 18.

Over this complex situation the mind of Keggs, the butler, played like a searchlight. Keggs was a man of discernment and sagacity. He had instinct and reasoning power. Instinct told him that Maud, all unsuspecting the change that had taken place in Albert's attitude toward her romance, would have continued to use the boy as a link between herself and George:  and reason, added to an intimate knowledge of Albert, enabled him to see that the latter must inevitably have betrayed her trust. He was prepared to bet a hundred pounds that Albert had been given letters to deliver and had destroyed them. So much was clear to Keggs. It only remained to settle on some plan of action which would re-establish the broken connection. Keggs did not conceal a tender heart beneath a rugged exterior: he did not mourn over the picture of two loving fellow human beings separated by a misunderstanding; but he did want to win that sweepstake.

His position, of course, was delicate. He could not got to Maud and beg her to confide in him. Maud would not understand his motives, and might leap to the not unjustifiable conclusion that he had been at the sherry. No! Men were easier to handle than women. As soon as his duties would permit--and in the present crowded condition of the house they were arduous--he set out for George's cottage.

"I trust I do not disturb or interrupt you, sir," he said, beaming

in the doorway like a benevolent high priest. He had doffed his professional manner of austere disapproval, as was his custom in moments of leisure.

"Not at all," replied George, puzzled. "Was there anything . . .?"

"There was, sir."

"Come along in and sit down."

"I would not take the liberty, if it is all the same to you, sir. I would prefer to remain standing."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Uncomfortable, that is to say, on the part of George, who was wondering if the butler remembered having engaged him as a waiter only a few nights back. Keggs himself was at his ease. Few things ruffled this man.

"Fine day," said George.

"Extremely, sir, but for the rain."

"Oh, is it raining?"

"Sharp downpour, sir."

"Good for the crops," said George.

"So one would be disposed to imagine, sir."

Silence fell again. The rain dripped from the eaves.

"If I might speak freely, sir . . .?" said Keggs.

"Sure. Shoot!"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I mean, yes. Go ahead!"

The butler cleared his throat.

"Might I begin by remarking that your little affair of the 'eart, if I may use the expression, is no secret in the Servants' 'All? I 'ave no wish to seem to be taking a liberty or presuming, but I should like to intimate that the Servants' 'All is aware of the facts."

"You don't have to tell me that," said George coldly. "I know all about the sweepstake."

A flicker of embarrassment passed over the butler's large, smooth

face--passed, and was gone.

"I did not know that you 'ad been apprised of that little matter, sir. But you will doubtless understand and appreciate our point of view. A little sporting flutter--nothing more--designed to halleviate the monotony of life in the country."

"Oh, don't apologize," said George, and was reminded of a point which had exercised him a little from time to time since his vigil on the balcony. "By the way, if it isn't giving away secrets, who drew Plummer?"

"Sir?"

"Which of you drew a man named Plummer in the sweep?"

"I rather fancy, sir," Keggs' brow wrinkled in thought, "I rather fancy it was one of the visiting gentlemen's gentlemen. I gave the point but slight attention at the time. I did not fancy Mr. Plummer's chances. It seemed to me that Mr. Plummer was a negligible quantity."

"Your knowledge of form was sound. Plummer's out!"

"Indeed, sir! An amiable young gentleman, but lacking in many of the essential qualities. Perhaps he struck you that way, sir?"

"I never met him. Nearly, but not quite!"

"It entered my mind that you might possibly have encountered Mr. Plummer on the night of the ball, sir."

"Ah, I was wondering if you remembered me!"

"I remember you perfectly, sir, and it was the fact that we had already met in what one might almost term a social way that emboldened me to come 'ere today and offer you my services as a hintermediary, should you feel disposed to avail yourself of them."

George was puzzled.

"Your services?"

"Precisely, sir. I fancy I am in a position to lend you what might be termed an 'elping 'and."

"But that's remarkably altruistic of you, isn't it?"

"Sir?"

"I say that is very generous of you. Aren't you forgetting that you drew Mr. Byng?"

The butler smiled indulgently.

"You are not quite abreast of the progress of events, sir. Since the original drawing of names, there 'as been a trifling hadjustment. The boy Albert now 'as Mr. Byng and I 'ave you, sir. A little amicable arrangement informally conducted in the scullery on the night of the ball."

"Amicable?"

"On my part, entirely so."

George began to understand certain things that had been perplexing to him.

"Then all this while. . .?"

"Precisely, sir. All this while 'er ladyship, under the impression that the boy Albert was devoted to 'er cause, has no doubt been placing a misguided confidence in 'im . . . The little blighter!" said Keggs, abandoning for a moment his company manners and permitting vehemence to take the place of polish. "I beg your pardon for the expression, sir," he added gracefully. "It escaped me inadvertently."

"You think that Lady Maud gave Albert a letter to give to me, and that he destroyed it?"

"Such, I should imagine, must undoubtedly have been the case. The boy 'as no scruples, no scruples whatsoever."

"Good Lord!"

"I appreciate your consternation, sir."

"That must be exactly what has happened."

"To my way of thinking there is no doubt of it. It was for that reason that I ventured to come 'ere. In the 'ope that I might be hinstrumental in arranging a meeting."

The strong distaste which George had had for plotting with this overfed menial began to wane. It might be undignified, he told himself but it was undeniably practical. And, after all, a man who has plotted with page-boys has little dignity to lose by plotting with butlers. He brightened up. If it meant seeing Maud again he was prepared to waive the decencies.

"What do you suggest?" he said.

"It being a rainy evening and everyone indoors playing games and

what not,"--Keggs was amiably tolerant of the recreations of the aristocracy--"you would experience little chance of a hinterruption, were you to proceed to the lane outside the heast entrance of the castle grounds and wait there. You will find in the field at the roadside a small disused barn only a short way from the gates, where you would be sheltered from the rain. In the meantime, I would hinform 'er ladyship of your movements, and no doubt it would be possible for 'er to slip off."

"It sounds all right."

"It is all right, sir. The chances of a hinterruption may be said to be reduced to a minimum. Shall we say in one hour's time?"

"Very well."

"Then I will wish you good evening, sir. Thank you, sir. I am glad to 'ave been of assistance."

He withdrew as he had come, with a large impressiveness. The room seemed very empty without him. George, with trembling fingers, began to put on a pair of thick boots.

For some minutes after he had set foot outside the door of the cottage, George was inclined to revile the weather for having played him false. On this evening of all evenings, he felt, the

elements should, so to speak, have rallied round and done their bit. The air should have been soft and clear and scented: there should have been an afterglow of sunset in the sky to light him on his way. Instead, the air was full of that peculiar smell of hopeless dampness which comes at the end of a wet English day. The sky was leaden. The rain hissed down in a steady flow, whispering of mud and desolation, making a dreary morass of the lane through which he tramped. A curious sense of foreboding came upon George. It was as if some voice of the night had murmured maliciously in his ear a hint of troubles to come. He felt oddly nervous, as he entered the barn.

The barn was both dark and dismal. In one of the dark corners an intermittent dripping betrayed the presence of a gap in its ancient roof. A rat scurried across the floor. The dripping stopped and began again. George struck a match and looked at his watch. He was early. Another ten minutes must elapse before he could hope for her arrival. He sat down on a broken wagon which lay on its side against one of the walls.

Depression returned. It was impossible to fight against it in this beast of a barn. The place was like a sepulchre. No one but a fool of a butler would have suggested it as a trysting-place. He wondered irritably why places like this were allowed to get into this condition. If people wanted a barn earnestly enough to take the trouble of building one, why was it not worth while to keep the

thing in proper repair? Waste and futility! That was what it was. That was what everything was, if you came down to it. Sitting here, for instance, was a futile waste of time. She wouldn't come. There were a dozen reasons why she should not come. So what was the use of his courting rheumatism by waiting in this morgue of dead agricultural ambitions? None whatever--George went on waiting.

And what an awful place to expect her to come to, if by some miracle she did come--where she would be stifled by the smell of mouldy hay, damped by raindrops and--reflected George gloomily as there was another scurry and scutter along the unseen floor--gnawed by rats. You could not expect a delicately-nurtured girl, accustomed to all the comforts of a home, to be bright and sunny with a platoon of rats crawling all over her. . . .

The grey oblong that was the doorway suddenly darkened.

"Mr. Bevan!"

George sprang up. At the sound of her voice every nerve in his body danced in mad exhilaration. He was another man. Depression fell from him like a garment. He perceived that he had misjudged all sorts of things. The evening, for instance, was a splendid evening--not one of those awful dry, baking evenings which make you feel you can't breathe, but pleasantly moist and full of a delightfully musical patter of rain. And the barn! He had been all

wrong about the barn. It was a great little place, comfortable, airy, and cheerful. What could be more invigorating than that smell of hay? Even the rats, he felt, must be pretty decent rats, when you came to know them.

"I'm here!"

Maud advanced quickly. His eyes had grown accustomed to the murk, and he could see her dimly. The smell of her damp raincoat came to him like a breath of ozone. He could even see her eyes shining in the darkness, so close was she to him.

"I hope you've not been waiting long?"

George's heart was thundering against his ribs. He could scarcely speak. He contrived to emit a No.

"I didn't think at first I could get away. I had to . . ." She broke off with a cry. The rat, fond of exercise like all rats, had made another of its excitable sprints across the floor.

A hand clutched nervously at George's arm, found it and held it. And at the touch the last small fragment of George's self-control fled from him. The world became vague and unreal. There remained of it but one solid fact--the fact that Maud was in his arms and that he was saying a number of things very rapidly in a voice that

seemed to belong to somebody he had never met before.