

CHAPTER 19.

With a shock of dismay so abrupt and overwhelming that it was like a physical injury, George became aware that something was wrong. Even as he gripped her, Maud had stiffened with a sharp cry; and now she was struggling, trying to wrench herself free. She broke away from him. He could hear her breathing hard.

"You--you----" She gulped.

"Maud!"

"How dare you!"

There was a pause that seemed to George to stretch on and on endlessly. The rain pattered on the leaky roof. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled dismally. The darkness pressed down like a blanket, stifling thought.

"Good night, Mr. Bevan." Her voice was ice. "I didn't think you were--that kind of man."

She was moving toward the door; and, as she reached it, George's stupor left him. He came back to life with a jerk, shaking from head to foot. All his varied emotions had become one emotion--a cold fury.

"Stop!"

Maud stopped. Her chin was tilted, and she was wasting a baleful glare on the darkness.

"Well, what is it?"

Her tone increased George's wrath. The injustice of it made him dizzy. At that moment he hated her. He was the injured party. It was he, not she, that had been deceived and made a fool of.

"I want to say something before you go."

"I think we had better say no more about it!"

By the exercise of supreme self-control George kept himself from speaking until he could choose milder words than those that rushed to his lips.

"I think we will!" he said between his teeth.

Maud's anger became tinged with surprise. Now that the first shock of the wretched episode was over, the calmer half of her mind was endeavouring to soothe the infuriated half by urging that George's behaviour had been but a momentary lapse, and that a man may lose

his head for one wild instant, and yet remain fundamentally a gentleman and a friend. She had begun to remind herself that this man had helped her once in trouble, and only a day or two before had actually risked his life to save her from embarrassment. When she heard him call to her to stop, she supposed that his better feelings had reasserted themselves; and she had prepared herself to receive with dignity a broken, stammered apology. But the voice that had just spoken with a crisp, biting intensity was not the voice of remorse. It was a very angry man, not a penitent one, who was commanding--not begging--her to stop and listen to him.

"Well?" she said again, more coldly this time. She was quite unable to understand this attitude of his. She was the injured party. It was she, not he who had trusted and been betrayed.

"I should like to explain."

"Please do not apologize."

George ground his teeth in the gloom.

"I haven't the slightest intention of apologizing. I said I would like to explain. When I have finished explaining, you can go."

"I shall go when I please," flared Maud.

This man was intolerable.

"There is nothing to be afraid of. There will be no repetition of the--incident."

Maud was outraged by this monstrous misinterpretation of her words.

"I am not afraid!"

"Then, perhaps, you will be kind enough to listen. I won't detain you long. My explanation is quite simple. I have been made a fool of. I seem to be in the position of the tinker in the play whom everybody conspired to delude into the belief that he was a king. First a friend of yours, Mr. Byng, came to me and told me that you had confided to him that you loved me."

Maud gasped. Either this man was mad, or Reggie Byng was. She choose the politer solution.

"Reggie Byng must have lost his senses."

"So I supposed. At least, I imagined that he must be mistaken. But a man in love is an optimistic fool, of course, and I had loved you ever since you got into my cab that morning . . ."

"What!"

"So after a while," proceeded George, ignoring the interruption, "I almost persuaded myself that miracles could still happen, and that what Byng said was true. And when your father called on me and told me the very same thing I was convinced. It seemed incredible, but I had to believe it. Now it seems that, for some inscrutable reason, both Byng and your father were making a fool of me. That's all. Good night."

Maud's reply was the last which George or any man would have expected. There was a moment's silence, and then she burst into a peal of laughter. It was the laughter of over-strained nerves, but to George's ears it had the ring of genuine amusement.

"I'm glad you find my story entertaining," he said dryly. He was convinced now that he loathed this girl, and that all he desired was to see her go out of his life for ever. "Later, no doubt, the funny side of it will hit me. Just at present my sense of humour is rather dormant."

Maud gave a little cry.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Mr. Bevan. It wasn't that. It wasn't that at all. Oh, I am so sorry. I don't know why I laughed. It certainly wasn't because I thought it funny. It's tragic. There's been a dreadful mistake!"

"I noticed that," said George bitterly. The darkness began to afflict his nerves. "I wish to God we had some light."

The glare of a pocket-torch smote upon him.

"I brought it to see my way back with," said Maud in a curious, small voice. "It's very dark across the fields. I didn't light it before, because I was afraid somebody might see."

She came towards him, holding the torch over her head. The beam showed her face, troubled and sympathetic, and at the sight all George's resentment left him. There were mysteries here beyond his unravelling, but of one thing he was certain: this girl was not to blame. She was a thoroughbred, as straight as a wand. She was pure gold.

"I came here to tell you everything," she said. She placed the torch on the wagon-wheel so that its ray fell in a pool of light on the ground between them. "I'll do it now. Only--only it isn't so easy now. Mr. Bevan, there's a man--there's a man that father and Reggie Byng mistook--they thought . . . You see, they knew it was you that I was with that day in the cab, and so they naturally thought, when you came down here, that you were the man I had gone to meet that day--the man I--I--"

"The man you love."

"Yes," said Maud in a small voice; and there was silence again.

George could feel nothing but sympathy. It mastered other emotion in him, even the grey despair that had come her words. He could feel all that she was feeling.

"Tell me all about it," he said.

"I met him in Wales last year." Maud's voice was a whisper. "The family found out, and I was hurried back here, and have been here ever since. That day when I met you I had managed to slip away from home. I had found out that he was in London, and I was going to meet him. Then I saw Percy, and got into your cab. It's all been a horrible mistake. I'm sorry."

"I see," said George thoughtfully. "I see."

His heart ached like a living wound. She had told so little, and he could guess so much. This unknown man who had triumphed seemed to sneer scornfully at him from the shadows.

"I'm sorry," said Maud again.

"You mustn't feel like that. How can I help you? That's the point.

What is it you want me to do?"

"But I can't ask you now."

"Of course you can. Why not?"

"Why--oh, I couldn't!"

George managed to laugh. It was a laugh that did not sound convincing even to himself, but it served.

"That's morbid," he said. "Be sensible. You need help, and I may be able to give it. Surely a man isn't barred for ever from doing you a service just because he happens to love you? Suppose you were drowning and Mr. Plummer was the only swimmer within call, wouldn't you let him rescue you?"

"Mr. Plummer? What do you mean?"

"You've not forgotten that I was a reluctant ear-witness to his recent proposal of marriage?"

Maud uttered an exclamation.

"I never asked! How terrible of me. Were you much hurt?"

"Hurt?" George could not follow her.

"That night. When you were on the balcony, and--"

"Oh!" George understood. "Oh, no, hardly at all. A few scratches. I scraped my hands a little."

"It was a wonderful thing to do," said Maud, her admiration glowing for a man who could treat such a leap so lightly. She had always had a private theory that Lord Leonard, after performing the same feat, had bragged about it for the rest of his life.

"No, no, nothing," said George, who had since wondered why he had ever made such a to-do about climbing up a perfectly stout sheet.

"It was splendid!"

George blushed.

"We are wandering from the main theme," he said. "I want to help you. I came here at enormous expense to help you. How can I do it?"

Maud hesitated.

"I think you may be offended at my asking such a thing."

"You needn't."

"You see, the whole trouble is that I can't get in touch with Geoffrey. He's in London, and I'm here. And any chance I might have of getting to London vanished that day I met you, when Percy saw me in Piccadilly."

"How did your people find out it was you?"

"They asked me--straight out."

"And you owned up?"

"I had to. I couldn't tell them a direct lie."

George thrilled. This was the girl he had had doubts of.

"So then it was worse than ever," continued Maud. "I daren't risk writing to Geoffrey and having the letter intercepted. I was wondering--I had the idea almost as soon as I found that you had come here--"

"You want me to take a letter from you and see that it reaches him. And then he can write back to my address, and I can smuggle the letter to you?"

"That's exactly what I do want. But I almost didn't like to ask."

"Why not? I'll be delighted to do it."

"I'm so grateful."

"Why, it's nothing. I thought you were going to ask me to look in on your brother and smash another of his hats."

Maud laughed delightedly. The whole tension of the situation had been eased for her. More and more she found herself liking George. Yet, deep down in her, she realized with a pang that for him there had been no easing of the situation. She was sad for George. The Plummers of this world she had consigned to what they declared would be perpetual sorrow with scarcely a twinge of regret. But George was different.

"Poor Percy!" she said. "I don't suppose he'll ever get over it. He will have other hats, but it won't be the same." She came back to the subject nearest her heart. "Mr. Bevan, I wonder if you would do just a little more for me?"

"If it isn't criminal. Or, for that matter, if it is."

"Could you go to Geoffrey, and see him, and tell him all about me

and--and come back and tell me how he looks, and what he said and--and so on?"

"Certainly. What is his name, and where do I find him?"

"I never told you. How stupid of me. His name is Geoffrey Raymond, and he lives with his uncle, Mr. Wilbur Raymond, at 11a, Belgrave Square."

"I'll go to him tomorrow."

"Thank you ever so much."

George got up. The movement seemed to put him in touch with the outer world. He noticed that the rain had stopped, and that stars had climbed into the oblong of the doorway. He had an impression that he had been in the barn a very long time; and confirmed this with a glance at his watch, though the watch, he felt, understated the facts by the length of several centuries. He was abstaining from too close an examination of his emotions from a prudent feeling that he was going to suffer soon enough without assistance from himself.

"I think you had better be going back," he said. "It's rather late. They may be missing you."

Maud laughed happily.

"I don't mind now what they do. But I suppose dinners must be dressed for, whatever happens." They moved together to the door. "What a lovely night after all! I never thought the rain would stop in this world. It's like when you're unhappy and think it's going on for ever."

"Yes," said George.

Maud held out her hand.

"Good night, Mr. Bevan."

"Good night."

He wondered if there would be any allusion to the earlier passages of their interview. There was none. Maud was of the class whose education consists mainly of a training in the delicate ignoring of delicate situations.

"Then you will go and see Geoffrey?"

"Tomorrow."

"Thank you ever so much."

"Not at all."

George admired her. The little touch of formality which she had contrived to impart to the conversation struck just the right note, created just the atmosphere which would enable them to part without weighing too heavily on the deeper aspect of that parting.

"You're a real friend, Mr. Bevan."

"Watch me prove it."

"Well, I must rush, I suppose. Good night!"

"Good night!"

She moved off quickly across the field. Darkness covered her. The dog in the distance had begun to howl again. He had his troubles, too.