

CHAPTER 20.

Trouble sharpens the vision. In our moments of distress we can see clearly that what is wrong with this world of ours is the fact that Misery loves company and seldom gets it. Toothache is an unpleasant ailment; but, if toothache were a natural condition of life, if all mankind were afflicted with toothache at birth, we should not notice it. It is the freedom from aching teeth of all those with whom we come in contact that emphasizes the agony. And, as with toothache, so with trouble. Until our private affairs go wrong, we never realize how bubbling over with happiness the bulk of mankind seems to be. Our aching heart is apparently nothing but a desert island in an ocean of joy.

George, waking next morning with a heavy heart, made this discovery before the day was an hour old. The sun was shining, and birds sang merrily, but this did not disturb him. Nature is ever callous to human woes, laughing while we weep; and we grow to take her callousness for granted. What jarred upon George was the infernal cheerfulness of his fellow men. They seemed to be doing it on purpose--triumphing over him--glorying in the fact that, however Fate might have shattered him, they were all right.

People were happy who had never been happy before. Mrs. Platt, for instance. A grey, depressed woman of middle age, she had seemed hitherto to have few pleasures beyond breaking dishes and relating

the symptoms of sick neighbours who were not expected to live through the week. She now sang. George could hear her as she prepared his breakfast in the kitchen. At first he had had a hope that she was moaning with pain; but this was dispelled when he had finished his toilet and proceeded downstairs. The sounds she emitted suggested anguish, but the words, when he was able to distinguish them, told another story. Incredible as it might seem, on this particular morning Mrs. Platt had elected to be light-hearted. What she was singing sounded like a dirge, but actually it was "Stop your tickling, Jock!" And, later, when she brought George his coffee and eggs, she spent a full ten minutes prattling as he tried to read his paper, pointing out to him a number of merry murders and sprightly suicides which otherwise he might have missed. The woman went out of her way to show him that for her, if not for less fortunate people, God this morning was in His heaven and all was right in the world.

Two tramps of supernatural exuberance called at the cottage shortly after breakfast to ask George, whom they had never even consulted about their marriages, to help support their wives and children. Nothing could have been more care-free and debonnaire than the demeanour of these men.

And then Reggie Byng arrived in his grey racing car, more cheerful than any of them.

Fate could not have mocked George more subtly. A sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things, and the sight of Reggie in that room reminded him that on the last occasion when they had talked together across this same table it was he who had been in a Fool's Paradise and Reggie who had borne a weight of care. Reggie this morning was brighter than the shining sun and gayer than the carolling birds.

"Hullo-ullo-ullo-ullo-ullo-ullo-ul-Lo! Topping morning, isn't it!" observed Reggie. "The sunshine! The birds! The absolute what-do-you-call-it of everything and so forth, and all that sort of thing, if you know what I mean! I feel like a two-year-old!"

George, who felt older than this by some ninety-eight years, groaned in spirit. This was more than man was meant to bear.

"I say," continued Reggie, absently reaching out for a slice of bread and smearing it with marmalade, "this business of marriage, now, and all that species of rot! What I mean to say is, what about it? Not a bad scheme, taking it big and large? Or don't you think so?"

George writhed. The knife twisted in the wound. Surely it was bad enough to see a happy man eating bread and marmalade without having to listen to him talking about marriage.

"Well, anyhow, be that as it may," said Reggie, biting jovially and speaking in a thick but joyous voice. "I'm getting married today, and chance it. This morning, this very morning, I leap off the dock!"

George was startled out of his despondency.

"What!"

"Absolutely, laddie!"

George remembered the conventions.

"I congratulate you."

"Thanks, old man. And not without reason. I'm the luckiest fellow alive. I hardly knew I was alive till now."

"Isn't this rather sudden?"

Reggie looked a trifle furtive. His manner became that of a conspirator.

"I should jolly well say it is sudden! It's got to be sudden.

Dashed sudden and deuced secret! If the mater were to hear of it, there's no doubt whatever she would form a flying wedge and bust up

the proceedings with no uncertain voice. You see, laddie, it's Miss Faraday I'm marrying, and the mater--dear old soul--has other ideas for Reginald. Life's a rummy thing, isn't it! What I mean to say is, it's rummy, don't you know, and all that."

"Very," agreed George.

"Who'd have thought, a week ago, that I'd be sitting in this jolly old chair asking you to be my best man? Why, a week ago I didn't know you, and, if anybody had told me Alice Faraday was going to marry me, I'd have given one of those hollow, mirthless laughs."

"Do you want me to be your best man?"

"Absolutely, if you don't mind. You see," said Reggie confidentially, "it's like this. I've got lots of pals, of course, buzzing about all over London and its outskirts, who'd be glad enough to rally round and join the execution-squad; but you know how it is. Their maters are all pals of my mater, and I don't want to get them into trouble for aiding and abetting my little show, if you understand what I mean. Now, you're different. You don't know the mater, so it doesn't matter to you if she rolls around and puts the Curse of the Byngs on you, and all that sort of thing. Besides, I don't know." Reggie mused. "Of course, this is the happiest day of my life," he proceeded, "and I'm not saying it isn't, but you know how it is--there's absolutely no doubt that a chappie does not

show at his best when he's being married. What I mean to say is, he's more or less bound to look a fearful ass. And I'm perfectly certain it would put me right off my stroke if I felt that some chump like Jack Ferris or Ronnie Fitzgerald was trying not to giggle in the background. So, if you will be a sportsman and come and hold my hand till the thing's over, I shall be eternally grateful."

"Where are you going to be married?"

"In London. Alice sneaked off there last night. It was easy, as it happened, because by a bit of luck old Marshmoreton had gone to town yesterday morning--nobody knows why: he doesn't go up to London more than a couple of times a year. She's going to meet me at the Savoy, and then the scheme was to toddle round to the nearest registrar and request the lad to unleash the marriage service. I'm whizzing up in the car, and I'm hoping to be able to persuade you to come with me. Say the word, laddie!"

George reflected. He liked Reggie, and there was no particular reason in the world why he should not give him aid and comfort in this crisis. True, in his present frame of mind, it would be torture to witness a wedding ceremony; but he ought not to let that stand in the way of helping a friend.

"All right," he said.

"Stout fellow! I don't know how to thank you. It isn't putting you out or upsetting your plans, I hope, or anything on those lines?"

"Not at all. I had to go up to London today, anyway."

"Well, you can't get there quicker than in my car. She's a hummer. By the way, I forgot to ask. How is your little affair coming along? Everything going all right?"

"In a way," said George. He was not equal to confiding his troubles to Reggie.

"Of course, your trouble isn't like mine was. What I mean is, Maud loves you, and all that, and all you've got to think out is a scheme for laying the jolly old family a stymie. It's a pity--almost--that yours isn't a case of having to win the girl, like me; because by Jove, laddie," said Reggie with solemn emphasis, "I could help you there. I've got the thing down fine. I've got the infallible dope."

George smiled bleakly.

"You have? You're a useful fellow to have around. I wish you would tell me what it is."

"But you don't need it."

"No, of course not. I was forgetting."

Reggie looked at his watch.

"We ought to be shifting in a quarter of an hour or so. I don't want to be late. It appears that there's a catch of some sort in this business of getting married. As far as I can make out, if you roll in after a certain hour, the Johnnie in charge of the proceedings gives you the miss-in-baulk, and you have to turn up again next day. However, we shall be all right unless we have a breakdown, and there's not much chance of that. I've been tuning up the old car since seven this morning, and she's sound in wind and limb, absolutely. Oil--petrol--water--air--nuts--bolts--sprockets--carburetter--all present and correct. I've been looking after them like a lot of baby sisters. Well, as I was saying, I've got the dope. A week ago I was just one of the mugs--didn't know a thing about it--but now! Gaze on me, laddie! You see before you old Colonel Romeo, the Man who Knows! It all started on the night of the ball. There was the dickens of a big ball, you know, to celebrate old Boots' coming-of-age--to which, poor devil, he contributed nothing but the sunshine of his smile, never having learned to dance. On that occasion a most rummy and extraordinary thing happened. I got pickled to the eyebrows!" He laughed happily.

"I don't mean that that was a unique occurrence and so forth,

because, when I was a bachelor, it was rather a habit of mine to get a trifle submerged every now and again on occasions of decent mirth and festivity. But the rummy thing that night was that I showed it. Up till then, I've been told by experts, I was a chappie in whom it was absolutely impossible to detect the symptoms. You might get a bit suspicious if you found I couldn't move, but you could never be certain. On the night of the ball, however, I suppose I had been filling the radiator a trifle too enthusiastically. You see, I had deliberately tried to shove myself more or less below the surface in order to get enough nerve to propose to Alice. I don't know what your experience has been, but mine is that proposing's a thing that simply isn't within the scope of a man who isn't moderately woozled. I've often wondered how marriages ever occur in the dry States of America. Well, as I was saying, on the night of the ball a most rummy thing happened. I thought one of the waiters was you!"

He paused impressively to allow this startling statement to sink in.

"And was he?" said George.

"Absolutely not! That was the rummy part of it. He looked as like you as your twin brother."

"I haven't a twin brother."

"No, I know what you mean, but what I mean to say is he looked just like your twin brother would have looked if you had had a twin brother. Well, I had a word or two with this chappie, and after a brief conversation it was borne in upon me that I was up to the gills. Alice was with me at the time, and noticed it too. Now you'd have thought that that would have put a girl off a fellow, and all that. But no. Nobody could have been more sympathetic. And she has confided to me since that it was seeing me in my oiled condition that really turned the scale. What I mean is, she made up her mind to save me from myself. You know how some girls are. Angels absolutely! Always on the look out to pluck brands from the burning, and what not. You may take it from me that the good seed was definitely sown that night."

"Is that your recipe, then? You would advise the would-be bridegroom to buy a case of champagne and a wedding licence and get to work? After that it would be all over except sending out the invitations?"

Reggie shook his head.

"Not at all. You need a lot more than that. That's only the start. You've got to follow up the good work, you see. That's where a number of chappies would slip up, and I'm pretty certain I should have slipped up myself, but for another singularly rummy

occurrence. Have you ever had a what-do-you-call it? What's the word I want? One of those things fellows get sometimes."

"Headaches?" hazarded George.

"No, no. Nothing like that. I don't mean anything you get--I mean something you get, if you know what I mean."

"Measles?"

"Anonymous letter. That's what I was trying to say. It's a most extraordinary thing, and I can't understand even now where the deuce they came from, but just about then I started to get a whole bunch of anonymous letters from some chappie unknown who didn't sign his name."

"What you mean is that the letters were anonymous," said George.

"Absolutely. I used to get two or three a day sometimes. Whenever I went up to my room, I'd find another waiting for me on the dressing-table."

"Offensive?"

"Eh?"

"Were the letters offensive? Anonymous letters usually are."

"These weren't. Not at all, and quite the reverse. They contained a series of perfectly topping tips on how a fellow should proceed who wants to get hold of a girl."

"It sounds as though somebody had been teaching you ju-jitsu by post."

"They were great! Real red-hot stuff straight from the stable. Priceless tips like 'Make yourself indispensable to her in little ways', 'Study her tastes', and so on and so forth. I tell you, laddie, I pretty soon stopped worrying about who was sending them to me, and concentrated the old bean on acting on them. They worked like magic. The last one came yesterday morning, and it was a topper! It was all about how a chappie who was nervous should proceed. Technical stuff, you know, about holding her hand and telling her you're lonely and being sincere and straightforward and letting your heart dictate the rest. Have you ever asked for one card when you wanted to fill a royal flush and happened to pick out the necessary ace? I did once, when I was up at Oxford, and, by Jove, this letter gave me just the same thrill. I didn't hesitate. I just sailed in. I was cold sober, but I didn't worry about that. Something told me I couldn't lose. It was like having to hole out a three-inch putt. And--well, there you are, don't you know." Reggie became thoughtful. "Dash it all! I'd like to know who the fellow

was who sent me those letters. I'd like to send him a wedding-present or a bit of the cake or something. Though I suppose there won't be any cake, seeing the thing's taking place at a registrar's."

"You could buy a bun," suggested George.

"Well, I shall never know, I suppose. And now how about trickling forth? I say, laddie, you don't object if I sing slightly from time to time during the journey? I'm so dashed happy, you know."

"Not at all, if it's not against the traffic regulations."

Reggie wandered aimlessly about the room in an ecstasy.

"It's a rummy thing," he said meditatively, "I've just remembered that, when I was at school, I used to sing a thing called the what's-it's-name's wedding song. At house-suppers, don't you know, and what not. Jolly little thing. I daresay you know it. It starts 'Ding dong! Ding dong!' or words to that effect, 'Hurry along! For it is my wedding-morning!' I remember you had to stretch out the 'mor' a bit. Deuced awkward, if you hadn't laid in enough breath. 'The Yeoman's Wedding-Song.' That was it. I knew it was some chappie or other's. And it went on 'And the bride in something or other is doing something I can't recollect.' Well, what I mean is, now it's my wedding-morning! Rummy, when you come to think of it,

what? Well, as it's getting tolerable late, what about it? Shift ho?"

"I'm ready. Would you like me to bring some rice?"

"Thank you, laddie, no. Dashed dangerous stuff, rice! Worse than shrapnel. Got your hat? All set?"

"I'm waiting."

"Then let the revels commence," said Reggie. "Ding dong! Ding Dong! Hurry along! For it is my wedding-morning! And the bride-- Dash it, I wish I could remember what the bride was doing!"

"Probably writing you a note to say that she's changed her mind, and it's all off."

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed Reggie. "Come on!"