

CHAPTER 21.

Mr. and Mrs. Reginald Byng, seated at a table in the corner of the Regent Grill-Room, gazed fondly into each other's eyes. George, seated at the same table, but feeling many miles away, watched them moodily, fighting to hold off a depression which, cured for a while by the exhilaration of the ride in Reggie's racing-car (it had beaten its previous record for the trip to London by nearly twenty minutes), now threatened to return. The gay scene, the ecstasy of Reggie, the more restrained but equally manifest happiness of his bride--these things induced melancholy in George. He had not wished to attend the wedding-lunch, but the happy pair seemed to be revolted at the idea that he should stroll off and get a bite to eat somewhere else.

"Stick by us, laddie," Reggie had said pleadingly, "for there is much to discuss, and we need the counsel of a man of the world. We are married all right--"

"Though it didn't seem legal in that little registrar's office," put in Alice.

"--But that, as the blighters say in books, is but a beginning, not an end. We have now to think out the most tactful way of letting the news seep through, as it were, to the mater."

"And Lord Marshmoreton," said Alice. "Don't forget he has lost his secretary."

"And Lord Marshmoreton," amended Reggie. "And about a million other people who'll be most frightfully peeved at my doing the Wedding Glide without consulting them. Stick by us, old top. Join our simple meal. And over the old coronas we will discuss many things."

The arrival of a waiter with dishes broke up the silent communion between husband and wife, and lowered Reggie to a more earthly plane. He refilled the glasses from the stout bottle that nestled in the ice-bucket--("Only this one, dear!" murmured the bride in a warning undertone, and "All right darling!" replied the dutiful groom)--and raised his own to his lips.

"Cheerio! Here's to us all! Maddest, merriest day of all the glad New year and so forth. And now," he continued, becoming sternly practical, "about the good old sequel and aftermath, so to speak, of this little binge of ours. What's to be done. You're a brainy sort of feller, Bevan, old man, and we look to you for suggestions. How would you set about breaking the news to mother?"

"Write her a letter," said George.

Reggie was profoundly impressed.

"Didn't I tell you he would have some devilish shrewd scheme?" he said enthusiastically to Alice. "Write her a letter! What could be better? Poetry, by Gad!" His face clouded. "But what would you say in it? That's a pretty knotty point."

"Not at all. Be perfectly frank and straightforward. Say you are sorry to go against her wishes--"

"Wishes," murmured Reggie, scribbling industrially on the back of the marriage licence.

--"But you know that all she wants is your happiness--"

Reggie looked doubtful.

"I'm not sure about that last bit, old thing. You don't know the mater!"

"Never mind, Reggie," put in Alice. "Say it, anyhow. Mr. Bevan is perfectly right."

"Right ho, darling! All right, laddie--'happiness'. And then?"

"Point out in a few well-chosen sentences how charming Mrs. Byng is . . ."

"Mrs. Byng!" Reggie smiled fatuously. "I don't think I ever heard anything that sounded so indescribably ripping. That part'll be easy enough. Besides, the mater knows Alice."

"Lady Caroline has seen me at the castle," said his bride doubtfully, "but I shouldn't say she knows me. She has hardly spoken a dozen words to me."

"There," said Reggie, earnestly, "you're in luck, dear heart! The mater's a great speaker, especially in moments of excitement. I'm not looking forward to the time when she starts on me. Between ourselves, laddie, and meaning no disrespect to the dear soul, when the mater is moved and begins to talk, she uses up most of the language."

"Outspoken, is she?"

"I should hate to meet the person who could out-speak her," said Reggie.

George sought information on a delicate point.

"And financially? Does she exercise any authority over you in that way?"

"You mean has the mater the first call on the family doubloons?"

said Reggie. "Oh, absolutely not! You see, when I call her the mater, it's using the word in a loose sense, so to speak. She's my step-mother really. She has her own little collection of pieces of eight, and I have mine. That part's simple enough."

"Then the whole thing is simple. I don't see what you've been worrying about."

"Just what I keep telling him, Mr. Bevan," said Alice.

"You're a perfectly free agent. She has no hold on you of any kind."

Reggie Byng blinked dizzily.

"Why, now you put it like that," he exclaimed, "I can see that I jolly well am! It's an amazing thing, you know, habit and all that. I've been so accustomed for years to jumping through hoops and shamming dead when the mater lifted a little finger, that it absolutely never occurred to me that I had a soul of my own. I give you my honest word I never saw it till this moment."

"And now it's too late!"

"Eh?"

George indicated Alice with a gesture. The newly-made Mrs. Byng smiled.

"Mr. Bevan means that now you've got to jump through hoops and sham dead when I lift a little finger!"

Reggie raised her hand to his lips, and nibbled at it gently.

"Blessums 'ittle finger! It shall lift it and have 'ums Reggie jumping through. . . ." He broke off and tendered George a manly apology. "Sorry, old top! Forgot myself for the moment. Shan't occur again! Have another chicken or an éclair or some soup or something!"

Over the cigars Reggie became expansive.

"Now that you've lifted the frightful weight of the mater off my mind, dear old lad," he said, puffing luxuriously, "I find myself surveying the future in a calmer spirit. It seems to me that the best thing to do, as regards the mater and everybody else, is simply to prolong the merry wedding-trip till Time the Great Healer has had a chance to cure the wound. Alice wants to put in a week or so in Paris. . . ."

"Paris!" murmured the bride ecstatically.

"Then I would like to trickle southwards to the Riviera. . ."

"If you mean Monte Carlo, dear," said his wife with gentle firmness, "no!"

"No, no, not Monte Carlo," said Reggie hastily, "though it's a great place. Air--scenery--and what not! But Nice and Bordighera and Mentone and other fairly ripe resorts. You'd enjoy them. And after that . . . I had a scheme for buying back my yacht, the jolly old Siren, and cruising about the Mediterranean for a month or so. I sold her to a local sportsman when I was in America a couple of years ago. But I saw in the paper yesterday that the poor old buffer had died suddenly, so I suppose it would be difficult to get hold of her for the time being." Reggie broke off with a sharp exclamation.

"My sainted aunt!"

"What's the matter?"

Both his companions were looking past him, wide-eyed. George occupied the chair that had its back to the door, and was unable to see what it was that had caused their consternation; but he deduced that someone known to both of them must have entered the restaurant; and his first thought, perhaps naturally, was that it must be Reggie's "mater". Reggie dived behind a menu, which he held

before him like a shield, and his bride, after one quick look, had turned away so that her face was hidden. George swung around, but the newcomer, whoever he or she was, was now seated and indistinguishable from the rest of the lunchers.

"Who is it?"

Reggie laid down the menu with the air of one who after a momentary panic rallies.

"Don't know what I'm making such a fuss about," he said stoutly. "I keep forgetting that none of these blighters really matter in the scheme of things. I've a good mind to go over and pass the time of day."

"Don't!" pleaded his wife. "I feel so guilty."

"Who is it?" asked George again. "Your step-mother?"

"Great Scott, no!" said Reggie. "Nothing so bad as that. It's old Marshmoreton."

"Lord Marshmoreton!"

"Absolutely! And looking positively festive."

"I feel so awful, Mr. Bevan," said Alice. "You know, I left the castle without a word to anyone, and he doesn't know yet that there won't be any secretary waiting for him when he gets back."

Reggie took another look over George's shoulder and chuckled.

"It's all right, darling. Don't worry. We can nip off secretly by the other door. He's not going to stop us. He's got a girl with him! The old boy has come to life--absolutely! He's gassing away sixteen to the dozen to a frightfully pretty girl with gold hair. If you slew the old bean round at an angle of about forty-five, Bevan, old top, you can see her. Take a look. He won't see you. He's got his back to us."

"Do you call her pretty?" asked Alice disparagingly.

"Now that I take a good look, precious," replied Reggie with alacrity, "no! Absolutely not! Not my style at all!"

His wife crumbled bread.

"I think she must know you, Reggie dear," she said softly. "She's waving to you."

"She's waving to me," said George, bringing back the sunshine to Reggie's life, and causing the latter's face to lose its hunted

look. "I know her very well. Her name's Dore. Billie Dore."

"Old man," said Reggie, "be a good fellow and slide over to their table and cover our retreat. I know there's nothing to be afraid of really, but I simply can't face the old boy."

"And break the news to him that I've gone, Mr. Bevan," added Alice.

"Very well, I'll say good-bye, then."

"Good-bye, Mr. Bevan, and thank you ever so much."

Reggie shook George's hand warmly.

"Good-bye, Bevan old thing, you're a ripper. I can't tell you how bucked up I am at the sportsmanlike way you've rallied round. I'll do the same for you one of these days. Just hold the old boy in play for a minute or two while we leg it. And, if he wants us, tell him our address till further notice is Paris. What ho! What ho! What ho! Toodle-oo, laddie, toodle-oo!"

George threaded his way across the room. Billie Dore welcomed him with a friendly smile. The earl, who had turned to observe his progress, seemed less delighted to see him. His weather-beaten face wore an almost furtive look. He reminded George of a schoolboy who has been caught in some breach of the law.

"Fancy seeing you here, George!" said Billie. "We're always meeting, aren't we? How did you come to separate yourself from the pigs and chickens? I thought you were never going to leave them."

"I had to run up on business," explained George. "How are you, Lord Marshmoreton?"

The earl nodded briefly.

"So you're on to him, too?" said Billie. "When did you get wise?"

"Lord Marshmoreton was kind enough to call on me the other morning and drop the incognito."

"Isn't dadda the foxiest old thing!" said Billie delightedly.

"Imagine him standing there that day in the garden, kidding us along like that! I tell you, when they brought me his card last night after the first act and I went down to take a slant at this Lord Marshmoreton and found dadda hanging round the stage door, you could have knocked me over with a whisk-broom."

"I have not stood at the stage-door for twenty-five years," said Lord Marshmoreton sadly.

"Now, it's no use your pulling that Henry W. Methuselah stuff,"

said Billie affectionately. "You can't get away with it. Anyone can see you're just a kid. Can't they, George?" She indicated the blushing earl with a wave of the hand. "Isn't dad-da the youngest thing that ever happened?"

"Exactly what I told him myself."

Lord Marshmoreton giggled. There is no other verb that describes the sound that proceeded from him.

"I feel young," he admitted.

"I wish some of the juveniles in the shows I've been in," said Billie, "were as young as you. It's getting so nowadays that one's thankful if a juvenile has teeth." She glanced across the room. "Your pals are walking out on you, George. The people you were lunching with," she explained. "They're leaving."

"That's all right. I said good-bye to them." He looked at Lord Marshmoreton. It seemed a suitable opportunity to break the news. "I was lunching with Mr. and Mrs. Byng," he said.

Nothing appeared to stir beneath Lord Marshmoreton's tanned forehead.

"Reggie Byng and his wife, Lord Marshmoreton," added George.

This time he secured the earl's interest. Lord Marshmoreton started.

"What!"

"They are just off to Paris," said George.

"Reggie Byng is not married!"

"Married this morning. I was best man."

"Busy little creature!" interjected Billie.

"But--but--!"

"You know his wife," said George casually. "She was a Miss Faraday. I think she was your secretary."

It would have been impossible to deny that Lord Marshmoreton showed emotion. His mouth opened, and he clutched the tablecloth. But just what the emotion was George was unable to say till, with a sigh that seemed to come from his innermost being, the other exclaimed "Thank Heaven!"

George was surprised.

"You're glad?"

"Of course I'm glad!"

"It's a pity they didn't know how you were going to feel. It would have saved them a lot of anxiety. I rather gathered they supposed that the shock was apt to darken your whole life."

"That girl," said Lord Marshmoreton vehemently, "was driving me crazy. Always bothering me to come and work on that damned family history. Never gave me a moment's peace . . ."

"I liked her," said George.

"Nice enough girl," admitted his lordship grudgingly. "But a damned nuisance about the house; always at me to go on with the family history. As if there weren't better things to do with one's time than writing all day about my infernal fools of ancestors!"

"Isn't dadda fractious today?" said Billie reprovingly, giving the Earl's hand a pat. "Quit knocking your ancestors! You're very lucky to have ancestors. I wish I had. The Dore family seems to go back about as far as the presidency of Willard Filmore, and then it kind of gets discouraged and quite cold. Gee! I'd like to feel that my great-great-great-grandmother had helped Queen Elizabeth with the

rent. I'm strong for the fine old stately families of England."

"Stately old fiddlesticks!" snapped the earl.

"Did you see his eyes flash then, George? That's what they call aristocratic rage. It's the fine old spirit of the Marshmoretons boiling over."

"I noticed it," said George. "Just like lightning."

"It's no use trying to fool us, dad-da," said Billie. "You know just as well as I do that it makes you feel good to think that, every time you cut yourself with your safety-razor, you bleed blue!"

"A lot of silly nonsense!" grumbled the earl.

"What is?"

"This foolery of titles and aristocracy. Silly fetish-worship! One man's as good as another. . . ."

"This is the spirit of '76!" said George approvingly.

"Regular I.W.W. stuff," agreed Billie. "Shake hands the President of the Bolsheviki!"

Lord Marshmoreton ignored the interruption. There was a strange look in his eyes. It was evident to George, watching him with close interest, that here was a revelation of the man's soul; that thoughts, locked away for years in the other's bosom were crying for utterance.

"Damned silly nonsense! When I was a boy, I wanted to be an engine-driver. When I was a young man, I was a Socialist and hadn't any idea except to work for my living and make a name for myself. I was going to the colonies. Canada. The fruit farm was actually bought. Bought and paid for!" He brooded a moment on that long-lost fruit farm. "My father was a younger son. And then my uncle must go and break his neck hunting, and the baby, poor little chap, got croup or something . . . And there I was, saddled with the title, and all my plans gone up in smoke . . . Silly nonsense! Silly nonsense!"

He bit the end of a cigar. "And you can't stand up against it," he went on ruefully. "It saps you. It's like some damned drug. I fought against it as long as I could, but it was no use. I'm as big a snob as any of them now. I'm afraid to do what I want to do. Always thinking of the family dignity. I haven't taken a free step for twenty-five years."

George and Billie exchanged glances. Each had the uncomfortable feeling that they were eavesdropping and hearing things not meant

to be heard. George rose.

"I must be getting along now," he said. "I've one or two things to do. Glad to have seen you again, Billie. Is the show going all right?"

"Fine. Making money for you right along."

"Good-bye, Lord Marshmoreton."

The earl nodded without speaking. It was not often now that he rebelled even in thoughts against the lot which fate had thrust upon him, and never in his life before had he done so in words. He was still in the grip of the strange discontent which had come upon him so abruptly.

There was a silence after George had gone.

"I'm glad we met George," said Billie. "He's a good boy." She spoke soberly. She was conscious of a curious feeling of affection for the sturdy, weather-tanned little man opposite her. The glimpse she had been given of his inner self had somehow made him come alive for her.

"He wants to marry my daughter," said Lord Marshmoreton. A few moments before, Billie would undoubtedly have replied to such a

statement with some jocular remark expressing disbelief that the earl could have a daughter old enough to be married. But now she felt oddly serious and unlike her usual flippant self.

"Oh?" was all she could find to say.

"She wants to marry him."

Not for years had Billie Dore felt embarrassed, but she felt so now. She judged herself unworthy to be the recipient of these very private confidences.

"Oh?" she said again.

"He's a good fellow. I like him. I liked him the moment we met. He knew it, too. And I knew he liked me."

A group of men and girls from a neighbouring table passed on their way to the door. One of the girls nodded to Billie. She returned the nod absently. The party moved on. Billie frowned down at the tablecloth and drew a pattern on it with a fork.

"Why don't you let George marry your daughter, Lord Marshmoreton?"

The earl drew at his cigar in silence.

"I know it's not my business," said Billie apologetically, interpreting the silence as a rebuff.

"Because I'm the Earl of Marshmoreton."

"I see."

"No you don't," snapped the earl. "You think I mean by that that I think your friend isn't good enough to marry my daughter. You think that I'm an incurable snob. And I've no doubt he thinks so, too, though I took the trouble to explain my attitude to him when we last met. You're wrong. It isn't that at all. When I say 'I'm the Earl of Marshmoreton', I mean that I'm a poor spineless fool who's afraid to do the right thing because he daren't go in the teeth of the family."

"I don't understand. What have your family got to do with it?"

"They'd worry the life out of me. I wish you could meet my sister Caroline! That's what they've got to do with it. Girls in my daughter's unfortunate position have got to marry position or money."

"Well, I don't know about position, but when it comes to money--why, George is the fellow that made the dollar-bill famous. He and Rockefeller have got all there is, except the little bit

they have let Andy Carnegie have for car-fare."

"What do you mean? He told me he worked for a living." Billie was becoming herself again. Embarrassment had fled.

"If you call it work. He's a composer."

"I know. Writes tunes and things."

Billie regarded him compassionately.

"And I suppose, living out in the woods the way that you do that you haven't a notion that they pay him for it."

"Pay him? Yes, but how much? Composers were not rich men in my day."

"I wish you wouldn't talk of 'your day' as if you telling the boys down at the corner store about the good times they all had before the Flood. You're one of the Younger Set and don't let me have to tell you again. Say, listen! You know that show you saw last night. The one where I was supported by a few underlings. Well, George wrote the music for that."

"I know. He told me so."

"Well, did he tell you that he draws three per cent of the gross

receipts? You saw the house we had last night. It was a fair average house. We are playing to over fourteen thousand dollars a week. George's little bit of that is--I can't do it in my head, but it's a round four hundred dollars. That's eighty pounds of your money. And did he tell you that this same show ran over a year in New York to big business all the time, and that there are three companies on the road now? And did he mention that this is the ninth show he's done, and that seven of the others were just as big hits as this one? And did he remark in passing that he gets royalties on every copy of his music that's sold, and that at least ten of his things have sold over half a million? No, he didn't, because he isn't the sort of fellow who stands around blowing about his income. But you know it now."

"Why, he's a rich man!"

"I don't know what you call rich, but, keeping on the safe side, I should say that George pulls down in a good year, during the season--around five thousand dollars a week."

Lord Marshmoreton was frankly staggered.

"A thousand pounds a week! I had no idea!"

"I thought you hadn't. And, while I'm boosting George, let me tell you another thing. He's one of the whitest men that ever happened.

I know him. You can take it from me, if there's anything rotten in a fellow, the show-business will bring it out, and it hasn't come out in George yet, so I guess it isn't there. George is all right!"

"He has at least an excellent advocate."

"Oh, I'm strong for George. I wish there were more like him . . . Well, if you think I've butted in on your private affairs sufficiently, I suppose I ought to be moving. We've a rehearsal this afternoon."

"Let it go!" said Lord Marshmoreton boyishly.

"Yes, and how quick do you think they would let me go, if I did? I'm an honest working-girl, and I can't afford to lose jobs."

Lord Marshmoreton fiddled with his cigar-butt.

"I could offer you an alternative position, if you cared to accept it."

Billie looked at him keenly. Other men in similar circumstances had made much the same remark to her. She was conscious of feeling a little disappointed in her new friend.

"Well?" she said dryly. "Shoot."

"You gathered, no doubt, from Mr. Bevan's conversation, that my secretary has left me and run away and got married? Would you like to take her place?"

It was not easy to disconcert Billie Dore, but she was taken aback. She had been expecting something different.

"You're a shriek, dadda!"

"I'm perfectly serious."

"Can you see me at a castle?"

"I can see you perfectly." Lord Marshmoreton's rather formal manner left him. "Do please accept, my dear child. I've got to finish this damned family history some time or other. The family expect me to. Only yesterday my sister Caroline got me in a corner and bored me for half an hour about it. I simply can't face the prospect of getting another Alice Faraday from an agency. Charming girl, charming girl, of course, but . . . but . . . well, I'll be damned if I do it, and that's the long and short of it!"

Billie bubbled over with laughter.

"Of all the impulsive kids!" she gurgled. "I never met anyone like you, daddy! You don't even know that I can use a typewriter."

"I do. Mr. Bevan told me you were an excellent stenographer."

"So George has been boosting me, too, has he?" She mused. "I must say, I'd love to come. That old place got me when I saw it that day."

"That's settled, then," said Lord Marshmoreton masterfully. "Go to the theatre and tell them--tell whatever is usual in these cases. And then go home and pack, and meet me at Waterloo at six o'clock. The train leaves at six-fifteen."

"Return of the wanderer, accompanied by dizzy blonde! You've certainly got it all fixed, haven't you! Do you think the family will stand for me?"

"Damn the family!" said Lord Marshmoreton, stoutly.

"There's one thing," said Billie complacently, eyeing her reflection in the mirror of her vanity-case, "I may glitter in the fighting-top, but it is genuine. When I was a kid, I was a regular little tow-head."

"I never supposed for a moment that it was anything but genuine."

"Then you've got a fine, unsuspecting nature, daddy, and I admire you for it."

"Six o'clock at Waterloo," said the earl. "I will be waiting for you."

Billie regarded him with affectionate admiration.

"Boys will be boys," she said. "All right. I'll be there."