

CHAPTER 22.

"Young blighted Albert," said Keggs the butler, shifting his weight so that it distributed itself more comfortably over the creaking chair in which he reclined, "let this be a lesson to you, young feller me lad."

The day was a week after Lord Marshmoreton's visit to London, the hour six o'clock. The housekeeper's room, in which the upper servants took their meals, had emptied. Of the gay company which had just finished dinner only Keggs remained, placidly digesting. Albert, whose duty it was to wait on the upper servants, was moving to and fro, morosely collecting the plates and glasses. The boy was in no happy frame of mind. Throughout dinner the conversation at table had dealt almost exclusively with the now celebrated elopement of Reggie Byng and his bride, and few subjects could have made more painful listening to Albert.

"What's been the result and what I might call the upshot," said Keggs, continuing his homily, "of all your making yourself so busy and thrusting of yourself forward and meddling in the affairs of your elders and betters? The upshot and issue of it 'as been that you are out five shillings and nothing to show for it. Five shillings what you might have spent on some good book and improved your mind! And goodness knows it wants all the improving it can get, for of all the worthless, idle little messers it's ever been

my misfortune to have dealings with, you are the champion. Be careful of them plates, young man, and don't breathe so hard. You 'aven't got hasthma or something, 'ave you?"

"I can't breathe now!" complained the stricken child.

"Not like a grampus you can't, and don't you forget it." Keggs wagged his head reprovngly. "Well, so your Reggie Byng's gone and eloped, has he! That ought to teach you to be more careful another time 'ow you go gambling and plunging into sweepstakes. The idea of a child of your age 'aving the audacity to thrust 'isself forward like that!"

"Don't call him my Reggie Byng! I didn't draw 'im!"

"There's no need to go into all that again, young feller. You accepted 'im freely and without prejudice when the fair exchange was suggested, so for all practical intents and purposes he is your Reggie Byng. I 'ope you're going to send him a wedding-present."

"Well, you ain't any better off than me, with all your 'ighway robbery!"

"My what!"

"You 'eard what I said."

"Well, don't let me 'ear it again. The idea! If you 'ad any objections to parting with that ticket, you should have stated them clearly at the time. And what do you mean by saying I ain't any better off than you are?"

"I 'ave my reasons."

"You think you 'ave, which is a very different thing. I suppose you imagine that you've put a stopper on a certain little affair by surreptitiously destroying letters entrusted to you."

"I never!" exclaimed Albert with a convulsive start that nearly sent eleven plates dashing to destruction.

"Ow many times have I got to tell you to be careful of them plates?" said Keggs sternly. "Who do you think you are--a juggler on the 'Alls, 'urling them about like that? Yes, I know all about that letter. You thought you was very clever, I've no doubt. But let me tell you, young blighted Albert, that only the other evening 'er ladyship and Mr. Bevan 'ad a long and extended interview in spite of all your hefforts. I saw through your little game, and I proceeded and went and arranged the meeting."

In spite of himself Albert was awed. He was oppressed by the sense of struggling with a superior intellect.

"Yes, you did!" he managed to say with the proper note of incredulity, but in his heart he was not incredulous. Dimly, Albert had begun to perceive that years must elapse before he could become capable of matching himself in battles of wits with this master-strategist.

"Yes, I certainly did!" said Keggs. "I don't know what 'appened at the interview--not being present in person. But I've no doubt that everything proceeded satisfactorily."

"And a fat lot of good that's going to do you, when 'e ain't allowed to come inside the 'ouse!"

A bland smile irradiated the butler's moon-like face.

"If by 'e you're allodin' to Mr. Bevan, young blighted Albert, let me tell you that it won't be long before 'e becomes a regular duly invited guest at the castle!"

"A lot of chance!"

"Would you care to 'ave another five shillings even money on it?"

Albert recoiled. He had had enough of speculation where the butler was concerned. Where that schemer was allowed to get within reach

of it, hard cash melted away.

"What are you going to do?"

"Never you mind what I'm going to do. I 'ave my methods. All I 'ave to say to you is that tomorrow or the day after Mr. Bevan will be seated in our dining-'all with 'is feet under our table, replying according to his personal taste and preference, when I ask 'im if 'e'll 'ave 'ock or sherry. Brush all them crumbs carefully off the tablecloth, young blighted Albert--don't shuffle your feet--breathe softly through your nose--and close the door be'ind you when you've finished!"

"Oh, go and eat cake!" said Albert bitterly. But he said it to his immortal soul, not aloud. The lad's spirit was broken.

Keggs, the processes of digestion completed, presented himself before Lord Belpher in the billiard-room. Percy was alone. The house-party, so numerous on the night of the ball and on his birthday, had melted down now to reasonable proportions. The second and third cousins had retired, flushed and gratified, to obscure dens from which they had emerged, and the castle housed only the more prominent members of the family, always harder to dislodge than the small fry. The Bishop still remained, and the Colonel. Besides these, there were perhaps half a dozen more of the closer relations: to Lord Belpher's way of thinking, half a dozen

too many. He was not fond of his family.

"Might I have a word with your lordship?"

"What is it, Keggs?"

Keggs was a self-possessed man, but he found it a little hard to begin. Then he remembered that once in the misty past he had seen Lord Belpher spanked for stealing jam, he himself having acted on that occasion as prosecuting attorney; and the memory nerved him.

"I earnestly 'ope that your lordship will not think that I am taking a liberty. I 'ave been in his lordship your father's service many years now, and the family honour is, if I may be pardoned for saying so, extremely near my 'eart. I 'ave known your lordship since you were a mere boy, and . . ."

Lord Belpher had listened with growing impatience to this preamble. His temper was seldom at its best these days, and the rolling periods annoyed him.

"Yes, yes, of course," he said. "What is it?"

Keggs was himself now. In his opening remarks he had simply been, as it were, winding up. He was now prepared to begin.

"Your lordship will recall inquiring of me on the night of the ball as to the bona fides of one of the temporary waiters? The one that stated that 'e was the cousin of young bli--of the boy Albert, the page? I have been making inquiries, your lordship, and I regret to say I find that the man was a impostor. He informed me that 'e was Albert's cousin, but Albert now informs me that 'e 'as no cousin in America. I am extremely sorry this should have occurred, your lordship, and I 'ope you will attribute it to the bustle and haste inseparable from duties as mine on such a occasion."

"I know the fellow was an impostor. He was probably after the spoons!"

Keggs coughed.

"If I might be allowed to take a further liberty, your lordship, might I suggest that I am aware of the man's identity and of his motive for visiting the castle."

He waited a little apprehensively. This was the crucial point in the interview. If Lord Belfer did not now freeze him with a glance and order him from the room, the danger would be past, and he could speak freely. His light blue eyes were expressionless as they met Percy's, but inwardly he was feeling much the same sensation as he was wont to experience when the family was in town and he had managed to slip off to Kempton Park or some other race-course and

put some of his savings on a horse. As he felt when the racing steeds thundered down the straight, so did he feel now.

Astonishment showed in Lord Belpher's round face. Just as it was about to be succeeded by indignation, the butler spoke again.

"I am aware, your lordship, that it is not my place to offer suggestions as to the private and intimate affairs of the family I 'ave the honour to serve, but, if your lordship would consent to overlook the liberty, I think I could be of 'elp and assistance in a matter which is causing annoyance and unpleasantness to all."

He invigorated himself with another dip into the waters of memory. Yes. The young man before him might be Lord Belpher, son of his employer and heir to all these great estates, but once he had seen him spanked.

Perhaps Percy also remembered this. Perhaps he merely felt that Keggs was a faithful old servant and, as such, entitled to thrust himself into the family affairs. Whatever his reasons, he now definitely lowered the barrier.

"Well," he said, with a glance at the door to make sure that there were no witnesses to an act of which the aristocrat in him disapproved, "go on!"

Keggs breathed freely. The danger-point was past.

"'Aving a natural interest, your lordship," he said, "we of the Servants' 'All generally manage to become respectfully aware of whatever 'appens to be transpirin' above stairs. May I say that I became acquainted at an early stage with the trouble which your lordship is unfortunately 'aving with a certain party?"

Lord Belper, although his whole being revolted against what practically amounted to hobnobbing with a butler, perceived that he had committed himself to the discussion. It revolted him to think that these delicate family secrets were the subject of conversation in menial circles, but it was too late to do anything now. And such was the whole-heartedness with which he had declared war upon George Bevan that, at this stage in the proceedings, his chief emotion was a hope that Keggs might have something sensible to suggest.

"I think, begging your lordship's pardon for making the remark, that you are acting injudicious. I 'ave been in service a great number of years, startin' as steward's room boy and rising to my present position, and I may say I 'ave 'ad experience during those years of several cases where the daughter or son of the 'ouse contemplated a misalliance, and all but one of the cases ended disastrously, your lordship, on account of the family trying opposition. It is my experience that opposition in matters of the

'heart is useless, feedin', as it, so to speak, does the flame.

Young people, your lordship, if I may be pardoned for employing the expression in the present case, are naturally romantic and if you keep 'em away from a thing they sit and pity themselves and want it all the more. And in the end you may be sure they get it. There's no way of stoppin' them. I was not on sufficiently easy terms with the late Lord Worlingham to give 'im the benefit of my experience on the occasion when the Honourable Aubrey Pershore fell in love with the young person at the Gaiety Theatre. Otherwise I could 'ave told 'im he was not acting judicious. His lordship opposed the match in every way, and the young couple ran off and got married at a registrar's. It was the same when a young man who was tutor to 'er ladyship's brother attracted Lady Evelyn Walls, the only daughter of the Earl of Ackleton. In fact, your lordship, the only entanglement of the kind that came to a satisfactory conclusion in the whole of my personal experience was the affair of Lady Catherine Duseby, Lord Bridgefield's daughter, who injudiciously became infatuated with a roller-skating instructor."

Lord Belfer had ceased to feel distantly superior to his companion. The butler's powerful personality hypnotized him. Long ere the harangue was ended, he was as a little child drinking in the utterances of a master. He bent forward eagerly. Keggs had broken off his remarks at the most interesting point.

"What happened?" inquired Percy.

"The young man," proceeded Keggs, "was a young man of considerable personal attractions, 'aving large brown eyes and a athletic lissome figure, brought about by roller-skating. It was no wonder, in the opinion of the Servants' 'All, that 'er ladyship should have found 'erself fascinated by him, particularly as I myself 'ad 'eard her observe at a full luncheon-table that roller-skating was in her opinion the only thing except her toy Pomeranian that made life worth living. But when she announced that she had become engaged to this young man, there was the greatest consternation. I was not, of course, privileged to be a participant at the many councils and discussions that ensued and took place, but I was aware that such transpired with great frequency. Eventually 'is lordship took the shrewd step of assuming acquiescence and inviting the young man to visit us in Scotland. And within ten days of his arrival, your lordship, the match was broken off. He went back to 'is roller-skating, and 'er ladyship took up visiting the poor and eventually contracted an altogether suitable alliance by marrying Lord Ronald Spofforth, the second son of his Grace the Duke of Gorbals and Strathbungo."

"How did it happen?"

"Seein' the young man in the surroundings of 'er own 'ome, 'er ladyship soon began to see that she had taken too romantic a view of 'im previous, your lordship. 'E was one of the lower middle

class, what is sometimes termed the bourgeois, and his habits were not the habits of the class to which her ladyship belonged. He had nothing in common with the rest of the house-party, and was injudicious in his choice of forks. The very first night at dinner he took a steel knife to the ontray, and I see her ladyship look at him very sharp, as much as to say that scales had fallen from her eyes. It didn't take her long after that to become convinced that her heart had led her astray."

"Then you think--?"

"It is not for me to presume to offer anything but the most respectful advice, your lordship, but I should most certainly advocate a similar procedure in the present instance."

Lord Belfer reflected. Recent events had brought home to him the magnitude of the task he had assumed when he had appointed himself the watcher of his sister's movements. The affair of the curate and the village blacksmith had shaken him both physically and spiritually. His feet were still sore, and his confidence in himself had waned considerably. The thought of having to continue his espionage indefinitely was not a pleasant one. How much simpler and more effective it would be to adopt the suggestion which had been offered to him.

"--I'm not sure you aren't right, Keggs."

"Thank you, your lordship. I feel convinced of it."

"I will speak to my father tonight."

"Very good, your lordship. I am glad to have been of service."

"Young blighted Albert," said Keggs crisply, shortly after breakfast on the following morning, "you're to take this note to Mr. Bevan at the cottage down by Platt's farm, and you're to deliver it without playing any of your monkey-tricks, and you're to wait for an answer, and you're to bring that answer back to me, too, and to Lord Marshmoreton. And I may tell you, to save you the trouble of opening it with steam from the kitchen kettle, that I 'ave already done so. It's an invitation to dine with us tonight. So now you know. Look slippy!"

Albert capitulated. For the first time in his life he felt humble. He perceived how misguided he had been ever to suppose that he could pit his pigmy wits against this smooth-faced worker of wonders.

"Crikey!" he ejaculated.

It was all that he could say.

"And there's one more thing, young feller me lad," added Keggs earnestly, "don't you ever grow up to be such a fat'ead as our friend Percy. Don't forget I warned you."