

CHAPTER 23.

Life is like some crazy machine that is always going either too slow or too fast. From the cradle to the grave we alternate between the Sargasso Sea and the rapids--forever either becalmed or storm-tossed. It seemed to Maud, as she looked across the dinner-table in order to make sure for the twentieth time that it really was George Bevan who sat opposite her, that, after months in which nothing whatever had happened, she was now living through a period when everything was happening at once. Life, from being a broken-down machine, had suddenly begun to race.

To the orderly routine that stretched back to the time when she had been hurried home in disgrace from Wales there had succeeded a mad whirl of events, to which the miracle of tonight had come as a fitting climax. She had not begun to dress for dinner till somewhat late, and had consequently entered the drawing-room just as Keggs was announcing that the meal was ready. She had received her first shock when the love-sick Plummer, emerging from a mixed crowd of relatives and friends, had informed her that he was to take her in. She had not expected Plummer to be there, though he lived in the neighbourhood. Plummer, at their last meeting, had stated his intention of going abroad for a bit to mend his bruised heart: and it was a little disconcerting to a sensitive girl to find her victim popping up again like this. She did not know that, as far as Plummer was concerned, the whole affair was to be considered opened

again. To Plummer, analysing the girl's motives in refusing him, there had come the idea that there was Another, and that this other must be Reggie Byng. From the first he had always looked upon Reggie as his worst rival. And now Reggie had bolted with the Faraday girl, leaving Maud in excellent condition, so it seemed to Plummer, to console herself with a worthier man. Plummer knew all about the Rebound and the part it plays in the affairs of the heart. His own breach-of-promise case two years earlier had been entirely due to the fact that the refusal of the youngest Devenish girl to marry him had caused him to rebound into the dangerous society of the second girl from the O.P. end of the first row in the "Summertime is Kissing-time" number in the Alhambra revue. He had come to the castle tonight gloomy, but not without hope.

Maud's second shock eclipsed the first entirely. No notification had been given to her either by her father or by Percy of the proposed extension of the hand of hospitality to George, and the sight of him standing there talking to her aunt Caroline made her momentarily dizzy. Life, which for several days had had all the properties now of a dream, now of a nightmare, became more unreal than ever. She could conceive no explanation of George's presence. He could not be there--that was all there was to it; yet there undoubtedly he was. Her manner, as she accompanied Plummer down the stairs, took on such a dazed sweetness that her escort felt that in coming there that night he had done the wisest act of a lifetime studded but sparsely with wise acts. It seemed to Plummer that this

girl had softened towards him. Certainly something had changed her. He could not know that she was merely wondering if she was awake.

George, meanwhile, across the table, was also having a little difficulty in adjusting his faculties to the progress of events. He had given up trying to imagine why he had been invited to this dinner, and was now endeavouring to find some theory which would square with the fact of Billie Dore being at the castle. At precisely this hour Billie, by rights, should have been putting the finishing touches on her make-up in a second-floor dressing-room at the Regal. Yet there she sat, very much at her ease in this aristocratic company, so quietly and unobtrusively dressed in some black stuff that at first he had scarcely recognized her. She was talking to the Bishop. . .

The voice of Keggs at his elbow broke in on his reverie.

"Sherry or 'ock, sir?"

George could not have explained why this reminder of the butler's presence should have made him feel better, but it did. There was something solid and tranquilizing about Keggs. He had noticed it before. For the first time the sensation of having been smitten over the head with some blunt instrument began to abate. It was as if Keggs by the mere intonation of his voice had said, "All this no doubt seems very strange and unusual to you, but feel no alarm!

I am here!"

George began to sit up and take notice. A cloud seemed to have cleared from his brain. He found himself looking on his fellow-diners as individuals rather than as a confused mass. The prophet Daniel, after the initial embarrassment of finding himself in the society of the lions had passed away, must have experienced a somewhat similar sensation.

He began to sort these people out and label them. There had been introductions in the drawing-room, but they had left him with a bewildered sense of having heard somebody recite a page from Burke's peerage. Not since that day in the free library in London, when he had dived into that fascinating volume in order to discover Maud's identity, had he undergone such a rain of titles. He now took stock, to ascertain how many of these people he could identify.

The stock-taking was an absolute failure. Of all those present the only individuals he could swear to were his own personal little playmates with whom he had sported in other surroundings. There was Lord Belpher, for instance, eyeing him with a hostility that could hardly be called veiled. There was Lord Marshmoreton at the head of the table, listening glumly to the conversation of a stout woman with a pearl necklace, but who was that woman? Was it Lady Jane Allenby or Lady Edith Wade-Beverly or Lady Patricia Fowles? And

who, above all, was the pie-faced fellow with the moustache talking to Maud?

He sought assistance from the girl he had taken in to dinner. She appeared, as far as he could ascertain from a short acquaintance, to be an amiable little thing. She was small and young and fluffy, and he had caught enough of her name at the moment of introduction to gather that she was plain "Miss" Something--a fact which seemed to him to draw them together.

"I wish you would tell me who some of these people are," he said, as she turned from talking to the man on her other-side. "Who is the man over there?"

"Which man?"

"The one talking to Lady Maud. The fellow whose face ought to be shuffled and dealt again."

"That's my brother."

That held George during the soup.

"I'm sorry about your brother," he said rallying with the fish.

"That's very sweet of you."

"It was the light that deceived me. Now that I look again, I see that his face has great charm."

The girl giggled. George began to feel better.

"Who are some of the others? I didn't get your name, for instance. They shot it at me so quick that it had whizzed by before I could catch it."

"My name is Plummer."

George was electrified. He looked across the table with more vivid interest. The amorous Plummer had been just a Voice to him till now. It was exciting to see him in the flesh.

"And who are the rest of them?"

"They are all members of the family. I thought you knew them."

"I know Lord Marshmoreton. And Lady Maud. And, of course, Lord Belpher." He caught Percy's eye as it surveyed him coldly from the other side of the table, and nodded cheerfully. "Great pal of mine, Lord Belpher."

The fluffy Miss Plummer twisted her pretty face into a grimace of

disapproval.

"I don't like Percy."

"No!"

"I think he's conceited."

"Surely not? 'What could he have to be conceited about?"

"He's stiff."

"Yes, of course, that's how he strikes people at first. The first time I met him, I thought he was an awful stiff. But you should see him in his moments of relaxation. He's one of those fellows you have to get to know. He grows on you."

"Yes, but look at that affair with the policeman in London. Everybody in the county is talking about it."

"Young blood!" sighed George. "Young blood! Of course, Percy is wild."

"He must have been intoxicated."

"Oh, undoubtedly," said George.

Miss Plummer glanced across the table.

"Do look at Edwin!"

"Which is Edwin?"

"My brother, I mean. Look at the way he keeps staring at Maud. Edwin's awfully in love with Maud," she rattled on with engaging frankness. "At least, he thinks he is. He's been in love with a different girl every season since I came out. And now that Reggie Byng has gone and married Alice Faraday, he thinks he has a chance. You heard about that, I suppose?"

"Yes, I did hear something about it."

"Of course, Edwin's wasting his time, really. I happen to know"--Miss Plummer sank her voice to a whisper--"I happen to know that Maud's awfully in love with some man she met in Wales last year, but the family won't hear of it."

"Families are like that," agreed George.

"Nobody knows who he is, but everybody in the county knows all about it. Those things get about, you know. Of course, it's out of the question. Maud will have to marry somebody awfully rich or with a

title. Her family's one of the oldest in England, you know."

"So I understand."

"It isn't as if she were the daughter of Lord Peebles, somebody like that."

"Why Lord Peebles?"

"Well, what I mean to say is," said Miss Plummer, with a silvery echo of Reggie Byng, "he made his money in whisky."

"That's better than spending it that way," argued George.

Miss Plummer looked puzzled. "I see what you mean," she said a little vaguely. "Lord Marshmoreton is so different."

"Haughty nobleman stuff, eh?"

"Yes."

"So you think this mysterious man in Wales hasn't a chance?"

"Not unless he and Maud elope like Reggie Byng and Alice. Wasn't that exciting? Who would ever have suspected Reggie had the dash to do a thing like that? Lord Marshmoreton's new secretary is very

pretty, don't you think?"

"Which is she?"

"The girl in black with the golden hair."

"Is she Lord Marshmoreton's secretary?"

"Yes. She's an American girl. I think she's much nicer than Alice Faraday. I was talking to her before dinner. Her name is Dore. Her father was a captain in the American army, who died without leaving her a penny. He was the younger son of a very distinguished family, but his family disowned him because he married against their wishes."

"Something ought to be done to stop these families," said George.

"They're always up to something."

"So Miss Dore had to go out and earn her own living. It must have been awful for her, mustn't it, having to give up society."

"Did she give up society?"

"Oh, yes. She used to go everywhere in New York before her father died. I think American girls are wonderful. They have so much enterprise."

George at the moment was thinking that it was in imagination that they excelled.

"I wish I could go out and earn my living," said Miss Plummer.

"But the family won't dream of it."

"The family again!" said George sympathetically. "They're a perfect curse."

"I want to go on the stage. Are you fond of the theatre?"

"Fairly."

"I love it. Have you seen Hubert Broadleigh in 'Twas Once in Spring'?"

"I'm afraid I haven't."

"He's wonderful. Have you see Cynthia Dane in 'A Woman's No'?"

"I missed that one too."

"Perhaps you prefer musical pieces? I saw an awfully good musical comedy before I left town. It's called 'Follow the Girl'. It's at the Regal Theatre. Have you see it?"

"I wrote it."

"You--what!"

"That is to say, I wrote the music."

"But the music's lovely," gasped little Miss Plummer, as if the fact made his claim ridiculous. "I've been humming it ever since."

"I can't help that. I still stick to it that I wrote it."

"You aren't George Bevan!"

"I am!"

"But--" Miss Plummer's voice almost failed here--"But I've been dancing to your music for years! I've got about fifty of your records on the Victrola at home."

George blushed. However successful a man may be he can never get used to Fame at close range.

"Why, that tricky thing--you know, in the second act--is the darlinest thing I ever heard. I'm mad about it."

"Do you mean the one that goes lumty-lumty-tum, tumty-tumty-tum?"

"No the one that goes ta-rumty-tum-tum, ta-rumty-tum.

You know! The one about Granny dancing the shimmy."

"I'm not responsible for the words, you know," urged George hastily. "Those are wished on me by the lyrist."

"I think the words are splendid. Although poor popper thinks its improper, Granny's always doing it and nobody can stop her! I loved it." Miss Plummer leaned forward excitedly. She was an impulsive girl. "Lady Caroline."

Conversation stopped. Lady Caroline turned.

"Yes, Millie?"

"Did you know that Mr. Bevan was the Mr. Bevan?"

Everybody was listening now. George huddled pinkly in his chair. He had not foreseen this bally-hooing. Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego combined had never felt a tithe of the warmth that consumed him. He was essentially a modest young man.

"The Mr. Bevan?" echoed Lady Caroline coldly. It was painful to her to have to recognize George's existence on the same planet as

herself. To admire him, as Miss Plummer apparently expected her to do, was a loathsome task. She cast one glance, fresh from the refrigerator, at the shrinking George, and elevated her aristocratic eyebrows.

Miss Plummer was not damped. She was at the hero-worshipping age, and George shared with the Messrs. Fairbanks, Francis X. Bushman, and one or two tennis champions an imposing pedestal in her Hall of Fame.

"You know! George Bevan, who wrote the music of 'Follow the Girl'."

Lady Caroline showed no signs of thawing. She had not heard of 'Follow the Girl'. Her attitude suggested that, while she admitted the possibility of George having disgraced himself in the manner indicated, it was nothing to her.

"And all those other things," pursued Miss Plummer indefatigably.

"You must have heard his music on the Victrola."

"Why, of course!"

It was not Lady Caroline who spoke, but a man further down the table. He spoke with enthusiasm.

"Of course, by Jove!" he said. "The Schenectady Shimmy, by Jove,

and all that! Ripping!"

Everybody seemed pleased and interested. Everybody, that is to say, except Lady Caroline and Lord Belpher. Percy was feeling that he had been tricked. He cursed the imbecility of Keggs in suggesting that this man should be invited to dinner. Everything had gone wrong. George was an undoubted success. The majority of the company were solid for him. As far as exposing his unworthiness in the eyes of Maud was concerned, the dinner had been a ghastly failure. Much better to have left him to lurk in his infernal cottage. Lord Belpher drained his glass moodily. He was seriously upset.

But his discomfort at that moment was as nothing to the agony which rent his tortured soul a moment later. Lord Marshmoreton, who had been listening with growing excitement to the chorus of approval, rose from his seat. He cleared his throat. It was plain that Lord Marshmoreton had something on his mind.

"Er. . . ." he said.

The clatter of conversation ceased once more--stunned, as it always is at dinner parties when one of the gathering is seen to have assumed an upright position. Lord Marshmoreton cleared his throat again. His tanned face had taken on a deeper hue, and there was a look in his eyes which seemed to suggest that he was defying

something or somebody. It was the look which Ajax had in his eyes when he defied the lightning, the look which nervous husbands have when they announce their intention of going round the corner to bowl a few games with the boys. One could not say definitely that Lord Marshmoreton looked pop-eyed. On the other hand, one could not assert truthfully that he did not. At any rate, he was manifestly embarrassed. He had made up his mind to a certain course of action on the spur of the moment, taking advantage, as others have done, of the trend of popular enthusiasm: and his state of mind was nervous but resolute, like that of a soldier going over the top. He cleared his throat for the third time, took one swift glance at his sister Caroline, then gazed glassily into the emptiness above her head.

"Take this opportunity," he said rapidly, clutching at the table-cloth for support, "take this opportunity of announcing the engagement of my daughter Maud to Mr. Bevan. And," he concluded with a rush, pouring back into his chair, "I should like you all to drink their health!"

There was a silence that hurt. It was broken by two sounds, occurring simultaneously in different parts of the room. One was a gasp from Lady Caroline. The other was a crash of glass.

For the first time in a long unblemished career Keggs the butler had dropped a tray.