CHAPTER 24.

Out on the terrace the night was very still. From a steel-blue sky the stars looked down as calmly as they had looked on the night of the ball, when George had waited by the shrubbery listening to the wailing of the music and thinking long thoughts. From the dark meadows by the brook came the cry of a corncrake, its harsh note softened by distance.

"What shall we do?" said Maud. She was sitting on the stone seat where Reggie Byng had sat and meditated on his love for Alice Faraday and his unfortunate habit of slicing his approach-shots. To George, as he stood beside her, she was a white blur in the darkness. He could not see her face.

"I don't know!" he said frankly.

Nor did he. Like Lady Caroline and Lord Belpher and Keggs, the butler, he had been completely overwhelmed by Lord Marshmoreton's dramatic announcement. The situation had come upon him unheralded by any warning, and had found him unequal to it.

A choking sound suddenly proceeded from the whiteness that was Maud. In the stillness it sounded like some loud noise. It jarred on George's disturbed nerves.

"Please!"

"I c-can't help it!"

"There's nothing to cry about, really! If we think long enough, we shall find some way out all right. Please don't cry."

"I'm not crying!" The choking sound became an unmistakable ripple of mirth. "It's so absurd! Poor father getting up like that in front of everyone! Did you see Aunt Caroline's face?"

"It haunts me still," said George. "I shall never forget it. Your brother didn't seem any too pleased, either."

Maud stopped laughing.

"It's an awful position," she said soberly. "The announcement will be in the Morning Post the day after tomorrow. And then the letters of congratulation will begin to pour in. And after that the presents. And I simply can't see how we can convince them all that there has been a mistake." Another aspect of the matter struck her. "It's so hard on you, too."

"Don't think about me," urged George. "Heaven knows I'd give the whole world if we could just let the thing go on, but there's no use discussing impossibilities." He lowered his voice. "There's no

use, either, in my pretending that I'm not going to have a pretty bad time. But we won't discuss that. It was my own fault. I came butting in on your life of my own free will, and, whatever happens, it's been worth it to have known you and tried to be of service to you."

"You're the best friend I've ever had."

"I'm glad you think that."

"The best and kindest friend any girl ever had. I wish . . ."
She broke off. "Oh, well. . ."

There was a silence. In the castle somebody had begun to play the piano. Then a man's voice began to sing.

"That's Edwin Plummer," said Maud. "How badly he sings."

George laughed. Somehow the intrusion of Plummer had removed the tension. Plummer, whether designedly and as a sombre commentary on the situation or because he was the sort of man who does sing that particular song, was chanting Tosti's "Good-bye". He was giving to its never very cheery notes a wailing melancholy all his own. A dog in the stables began to howl in sympathy, and with the sound came a curious soothing of George's nerves. He might feel broken-hearted later, but for the moment, with this double accompaniment, it was

impossible for a man with humour in his soul to dwell on the deeper emotions. Plummer and his canine duettist had brought him to earth. He felt calm and practical.

"We'd better talk the whole thing over quietly," he said. "There's certain to be some solution. At the worst you can always go to Lord Marshmoreton and tell him that he spoke without a sufficient grasp of his subject."

"I could," said Maud, "but, just at present, I feel as if I'd rather do anything else in the world. You don't realize what it must have cost father to defy Aunt Caroline openly like that. Ever since I was old enough to notice anything, I've seen how she dominated him. It was Aunt Caroline who really caused all this trouble. If it had only been father, I could have coaxed him to let me marry anyone I pleased. I wish, if you possibly can, you would think of some other solution."

"I haven't had an opportunity of telling you," said George, "that I called at Belgrave Square, as you asked me to do. I went there directly I had seen Reggie Byng safely married."

"Did you see him married?"

"I was best man."

"Dear old Reggie! I hope he will be happy."

"He will. Don't worry about that. Well, as I was saying, I called at Belgrave Square, and found the house shut up. I couldn't get any answer to the bell, though I kept my thumb on it for minutes at a time. I think they must have gone abroad again."

"No, it wasn't that. I had a letter from Geoffrey this morning. His uncle died of apoplexy, while they were in Manchester on a business trip." She paused. "He left Geoffrey all his money," she went on. "Every penny."

The silence seemed to stretch out interminably. The music from the castle had ceased. The quiet of the summer night was unbroken. To George the stillness had a touch of the sinister. It was the ghastly silence of the end of the world. With a shock he realized that even now he had been permitting himself to hope, futile as he recognized the hope to be. Maud had told him she loved another man. That should have been final. And yet somehow his indomitable sub-conscious self had refused to accept it as final. But this news ended everything. The only obstacle that had held Maud and this man apart was removed. There was nothing to prevent them marrying. George was conscious of a vast depression. The last strand of the rope had parted, and he was drifting alone out into the ocean of desolation.

"Oh!" he said, and was surprised that his voice sounded very much the same as usual. Speech was so difficult that it seemed strange that it should show no signs of effort. "That alters everything, doesn't it."

"He said in his letter that he wanted me to meet him in London and--talk things over, I suppose."

"There's nothing now to prevent your going. I mean, now that your father has made this announcement, you are free to go where you please."

"Yes, I suppose I am."

There was another silence.

"Everything's so difficult," said Maud.

"In what way?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"If you are thinking of me," said George, "please don't. I know exactly what you mean. You are hating the thought of hurting my feelings. I wish you would look on me as having no feelings. All I want is to see you happy. As I said just now, it's enough for me to

know that I've helped you. Do be reasonable about it. The fact that our engagement has been officially announced makes no difference in our relations to each other. As far as we two are concerned, we are exactly where we were the last time we met. It's no worse for me now than it was then to know that I'm not the man you love, and that there's somebody else you loved before you ever knew of my existence. For goodness' sake, a girl like you must be used to having men tell her that they love her and having to tell them that she can't love them in return."

"But you're so different."

"Not a bit of it. I'm just one of the crowd."

"I've never known anybody quite like you."

"Well, you've never known anybody quite like Plummer, I should imagine. But the thought of his sufferings didn't break your heart."

"I've known a million men exactly like Edwin Plummer," said Maud emphatically. "All the men I ever have known have been like him--quite nice and pleasant and negative. It never seemed to matter refusing them. One knew that they would be just a little bit piqued for a week or two and then wander off and fall in love with somebody else. But you're different. You . . . matter."

"That is where we disagree. My argument is that, where your happiness is concerned, I don't matter."

Maud rested her chin on her hand, and stared out into the velvet darkness.

"You ought to have been my brother instead of Percy," she said at last. "What chums we should have been! And how simple that would have made everything!"

"The best thing for you to do is to regard me as an honorary brother. That will make everything simple."

"It's easy to talk like that . . . No, it isn't. It's horribly hard. I know exactly how difficult it is for you to talk as you have been doing--to try to make me feel better by pretending the whole trouble is just a trifle . . . It's strange . . . We have only met really for a few minutes at a time, and three weeks ago I didn't know there was such a person as you, but somehow I seem to know everything you're thinking. I've never felt like that before with any man . . . Even Geoffrey. . . He always puzzled me. . . ."

She broke off. The corncrake began to call again out in the distance.

"I wish I knew what to do," she said with a catch in her voice.

"I'll tell you in two words what to do. The whole thing is absurdly simple. You love this man and he loves you, and all that kept you apart before was the fact that he could not afford to marry you. Now that he is rich, there is no obstacle at all. I simply won't let you look on me and my feelings as an obstacle. Rule me out altogether. Your father's mistake has made the situation a little more complicated than it need have been, but that can easily be remedied. Imitate the excellent example of Reggie Byng. He was in a position where it would have been embarrassing to announce what he intended to do, so he very sensibly went quietly off and did it and left everybody to find out after it was done. I'm bound to say I never looked on Reggie as a master mind, but, when it came to find a way out of embarrassing situations, one has to admit he had the right idea. Do what he did!"

Maud started. She half rose from the stone seat. George could hear the quick intake of her breath.

"You mean--run away?"

"Exactly. Run away!"

An automobile swung round the corner of the castle from the direction of the garage, and drew up, purring, at the steps. There

was a flood of light and the sound of voices, as the great door opened. Maud rose.

"People are leaving," she said. "I didn't know it was so late." She stood irresolutely. "I suppose I ought to go in and say good-bye. But I don't think I can."

"Stay where you are. Nobody will see you."

More automobiles arrived. The quiet of the night was shattered by the noise of their engines. Maud sat down again.

"I suppose they will think it very odd of me not being there."

"Never mind what people think. Reggie Byng didn't."

Maud's foot traced circles on the dry turf.

"What a lovely night," she said. "There's no dew at all."

The automobiles snorted, tooted, back-fired, and passed away. Their clamour died in the distance, leaving the night a thing of peace and magic once more. The door of the castle closed with a bang.

"I suppose I ought to be going in now," said Maud.

"I suppose so. And I ought to be there, too, politely making my farewells. But something seems to tell me that Lady Caroline and your brother will be quite ready to dispense with the formalities. I shall go home."

They faced each other in the darkness.

"Would you really do that?" asked Maud. "Run away, I mean, and get married in London."

"It's the only thing to do."

"But . . . can one get married as quickly as that?"

"At a registrar's? Nothing simpler. You should have seen Reggie Byng's wedding. It was over before one realized it had started. A snuffy little man in a black coat with a cold in his head asked a few questions, wrote a few words, and the thing was done."

"That sounds rather . . . dreadful."

"Reggie didn't seem to think so."

"Unromantic, I mean. . . . Prosaic."

"You would supply the romance."

"Of course, one ought to be sensible. It is just the same as a regular wedding."

"In effects, absolutely."

They moved up the terrace together. On the gravel drive by the steps they paused.

"I'll do it!" said Maud.

George had to make an effort before he could reply. For all his sane and convincing arguments, he could not check a pang at this definite acceptance of them. He had begun to appreciate now the strain under which he had been speaking.

"You must," he said. "Well . . . good-bye."

There was light on the drive. He could see her face. Her eyes were troubled.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Do?"

"I mean, are you going to stay on in your cottage?"

"No, I hardly think I could do that. I shall go back to London tomorrow, and stay at the Carlton for a few days. Then I shall sail for America. There are a couple of pieces I've got to do for the Fall. I ought to be starting on them."

Maud looked away.

"You've got your work," she said almost inaudibly.

George understood her.

"Yes, I've got my work."

"I'm glad."

She held out her hand.

"You've been very wonderful... Right from the beginning . . . You've been . . . oh, what's the use of me saying anything?"

"I've had my reward. I've known you. We're friends, aren't we?"

"My best friend."

"Pals?"

"Pals!"

They shook hands.