

CHAPTER 25.

"I was never so upset in my life!" said Lady Caroline.

She had been saying the same thing and many other things for the past five minutes. Until the departure of the last guest she had kept an icy command of herself and shown an unruffled front to the world. She had even contrived to smile. But now, with the final automobile whirring homewards, she had thrown off the mask. The very furniture of Lord Marshmoreton's study seemed to shrink, seared by the flame of her wrath. As for Lord Marshmoreton himself, he looked quite shrivelled.

It had not been an easy matter to bring her erring brother to bay. The hunt had been in progress full ten minutes before she and Lord Belper finally cornered the poor wretch. His plea, through the keyhole of the locked door, that he was working on the family history and could not be disturbed, was ignored; and now he was face to face with the avengers.

"I cannot understand it," continued Lady Caroline. "You know that for months we have all been straining every nerve to break off this horrible entanglement, and, just as we had begun to hope that something might be done, you announce the engagement in the most public manner. I think you must be out of your mind. I can hardly believe even now that this appalling thing has happened. I am

hoping that I shall wake up and find it is all a nightmare. How you can have done such a thing, I cannot understand."

"Quite!" said Lord Belfer.

If Lady Caroline was upset, there are no words in the language that will adequately describe the emotions of Percy.

From the very start of this lamentable episode in high life, Percy had been in the forefront of the battle. It was Percy who had had his best hat smitten from his head in the full view of all Piccadilly. It was Percy who had suffered arrest and imprisonment in the cause. It was Percy who had been crippled for days owing to his zeal in tracking Maud across country. And now all his sufferings were in vain. He had been betrayed by his own father.

There was, so the historians of the Middle West tell us, a man of Chicago named Young, who once, when his nerves were unstrung, put his mother (unseen) in the chopping-machine, and canned her and labelled her "Tongue". It is enough to say that the glance of disapproval which Percy cast upon his father at this juncture would have been unduly severe if cast by the Young offspring upon their parent at the moment of confession.

Lord Marshmoreton had rallied from his initial panic. The spirit of revolt began to burn again in his bosom. Once the die is cast for

revolution, there can be no looking back. One must defy, not apologize. Perhaps the inherited tendencies of a line of ancestors who, whatever their shortcomings, had at least known how to treat their women folk, came to his aid. Possibly there stood by his side in this crisis ghosts of dead and buried Marshmoretons, whispering spectral encouragement in his ear--the ghosts, let us suppose, of that earl who, in the days of the seventh Henry, had stabbed his wife with a dagger to cure her tendency to lecture him at night; or of that other earl who, at a previous date in the annals of the family, had caused two aunts and a sister to be poisoned apparently from a mere whim. At any rate, Lord Marshmoreton produced from some source sufficient courage to talk back.

"Silly nonsense!" he grunted. "Don't see what you're making all this fuss about. Maud loves the fellow. I like the fellow. Perfectly decent fellow. Nothing to make a fuss about. Why shouldn't I announce the engagement?"

"You must be mad!" cried Lady Caroline. "Your only daughter and a man nobody knows anything about!"

"Quite!" said Percy.

Lord Marshmoreton seized his advantage with the skill of an adroit debater.

"That's where you're wrong. I know all about him. He's a very rich man. You heard the way all those people at dinner behaved when they heard his name. Very celebrated man! Makes thousands of pounds a year. Perfectly suitable match in every way."

"It is not a suitable match," said Lady Caroline vehemently. "I don't care whether this Mr. Bevan makes thousands of pounds a year or twopence-halfpenny. The match is not suitable. Money is not everything."

She broke off. A knock had come on the door. The door opened, and Billie Dore came in. A kind-hearted girl, she had foreseen that Lord Marshmoreton might be glad of a change of subject at about this time.

"Would you like me to help you tonight?" she asked brightly. "I thought I would ask if there was anything you wanted me to do."

Lady Caroline snatched hurriedly at her aristocratic calm. She resented the interruption acutely, but her manner, when she spoke, was bland.

"Lord Marshmoreton will not require your help tonight," she said.

"He will not be working."

"Good night," said Billie.

"Good night," said Lady Caroline.

Percy scowled a valediction.

"Money," resumed Lady Caroline, "is immaterial. Maud is in no position to be obliged to marry a rich man. What makes the thing impossible is that Mr. Bevan is nobody. He comes from nowhere. He has no social standing whatsoever."

"Don't see it," said Lord Marshmoreton. "The fellow's a thoroughly decent fellow. That's all that matters."

"How can you be so pig-headed! You are talking like an imbecile. Your secretary, Miss Dore, is a nice girl. But how would you feel if Percy were to come to you and say that he was engaged to be married to her?"

"Exactly!" said Percy. "Quite!"

Lord Marshmoreton rose and moved to the door. He did it with a certain dignity, but there was a strange hunted expression in his eyes.

"That would be impossible," he said.

"Precisely," said his sister. "I am glad that you admit it."

Lord Marshmoreton had reached the door, and was standing holding the handle. He seemed to gather strength from its support.

"I've been meaning to tell you about that," he said.

"About what?"

"About Miss Dore. I married her myself last Wednesday," said Lord Marshmoreton, and disappeared like a diving duck.