CHAPTER 26.

At a quarter past four in the afternoon, two days after the memorable dinner-party at which Lord Marshmoreton had behaved with so notable a lack of judgment, Maud sat in Ye Cosy Nooke, waiting for Geoffrey Raymond. He had said in his telegram that he would meet her there at four-thirty: but eagerness had brought Maud to the tryst a quarter of an hour ahead of time: and already the sadness of her surroundings was causing her to regret this impulsiveness. Depression had settled upon her spirit. She was aware of something that resembled foreboding.

Ye Cosy Nooke, as its name will immediately suggest to those who know their London, is a tea-shop in Bond Street, conducted by distressed gentlewomen. In London, when a gentlewoman becomes distressed--which she seems to do on the slightest provocation--she collects about her two or three other distressed gentlewomen, forming a quorum, and starts a tea-shop in the West-End, which she calls Ye Oak Leaf, Ye Olde Willow-Pattern, Ye Linden-Tree, or Ye Snug Harbour, according to personal taste. There, dressed in Tyrolese, Japanese, Norwegian, or some other exotic costume, she and her associates administer refreshments of an afternoon with a proud languor calculated to knock the nonsense out of the cheeriest customer. Here you will find none of the coarse bustle and efficiency of the rival establishments of Lyons and Co., nor the glitter and gaiety of Rumpelmayer's. These places have an

atmosphere of their own. They rely for their effect on an insufficiency of light, an almost total lack of ventilation, a property chocolate cake which you are not supposed to cut, and the sad aloofness of their ministering angels. It is to be doubted whether there is anything in the world more damping to the spirit than a London tea-shop of this kind, unless it be another London tea-shop of the same kind.

Maud sat and waited. Somewhere out of sight a kettle bubbled in an undertone, like a whispering pessimist. Across the room two distressed gentlewomen in fancy dress leaned against the wall. They, too, were whispering. Their expressions suggested that they looked on life as low and wished they were well out of it, like the body upstairs. One assumed that there was a body upstairs. One cannot help it at these places. One's first thought on entering is that the lady assistant will approach one and ask in a hushed voice "Tea or chocolate? And would you care to view the remains?"

Maud looked at her watch. It was twenty past four. She could scarcely believe that she had only been there five minutes, but the ticking of the watch assured her that it had not stopped. Her depression deepened. Why had Geoffrey told her to meet him in a cavern of gloom like this instead of at the Savoy? She would have enjoyed the Savoy. But here she seemed to have lost beyond recovery the first gay eagerness with which she had set out to meet the man she loved.

Suddenly she began to feel frightened. Some evil spirit, possibly the kettle, seemed to whisper to her that she had been foolish in coming here, to cast doubts on what she had hitherto regarded as the one rock-solid fact in the world, her love for Geoffrey. Could she have changed since those days in Wales? Life had been so confusing of late. In the vividness of recent happenings those days in Wales seemed a long way off, and she herself different from the girl of a year ago. She found herself thinking about George Bevan.

It was a curious fact that, the moment she began to think of George Bevan, she felt better. It was as if she had lost her way in a wilderness and had met a friend. There was something so capable, so soothing about George. And how well he had behaved at that last interview. George seemed somehow to be part of her life. She could not imagine a life in which he had no share. And he was at this moment, probably, packing to return to America, and she would never see him again. Something stabbed at her heart. It was as if she were realizing now for the first time that he was really going.

She tried to rid herself of the ache at her heart by thinking of Wales. She closed her eyes, and found that that helped her to remember. With her eyes shut, she could bring it all back--that rainy day, the graceful, supple figure that had come to her out of the mist, those walks over the hills . . . If only Geoffrey would come! It was the sight of him that she needed.

"There you are!"

Maud opened her eyes with a start. The voice had sounded like Geoffrey's. But it was a stranger who stood by the table. And not a particularly prepossessing stranger. In the dim light of Ye Cosy Nooke, to which her opening eyes had not yet grown accustomed, all she could see of the man was that he was remarkably stout. She stiffened defensively. This was what a girl who sat about in tea-rooms alone had to expect.

"Hope I'm not late," said the stranger, sitting down and breathing heavily. "I thought a little exercise would do me good, so I walked."

Every nerve in Maud's body seemed to come to life simultaneously. She tingled from head to foot. It was Geoffrey!

He was looking over his shoulder and endeavouring by snapping his fingers to attract the attention of the nearest distressed gentlewoman; and this gave Maud time to recover from the frightful shock she had received. Her dizziness left her; and, leaving, was succeeded by a panic dismay. This couldn't be Geoffrey! It was outrageous that it should be Geoffrey! And yet it undeniably was Geoffrey. For a year she had prayed that Geoffrey might be given back to her, and the gods had heard her prayer. They had given her

back Geoffrey, and with a careless generosity they had given her twice as much of him as she had expected. She had asked for the slim Apollo whom she had loved in Wales, and this colossal changeling had arrived in his stead.

We all of us have our prejudices. Maud had a prejudice against fat men. It may have been the spectacle of her brother Percy, bulging more and more every year she had known him, that had caused this kink in her character. At any rate, it existed, and she gazed in sickened silence at Geoffrey. He had turned again now, and she was enabled to get a full and complete view of him. He was not merely stout. He was gross. The slim figure which had haunted her for a year had spread into a sea of waistcoat. The keen lines of his face had disappeared altogether. His cheeks were pink jellies.

One of the distressed gentlewomen had approached with a slow disdain, and was standing by the table, brooding on the corpse upstairs. It seemed a shame to bother her.

"Tea or chocolate?" she inquired proudly.

"Tea, please," said Maud, finding her voice.

"One tea," sighed the mourner.

"Chocolate for me," said Geoffrey briskly, with the air of one

discoursing on a congenial topic. "I'd like plenty of whipped cream. And please see that it's hot."

"One chocolate."

Geoffrey pondered. This was no light matter that occupied him.

"And bring some fancy cakes--I like the ones with icing on them--and some tea-cake and buttered toast. Please see there's plenty of butter on it."

Maud shivered. This man before her was a man in whose lexicon there should have been no such word as butter, a man who should have called for the police had some enemy endeavoured to thrust butter upon him.

"Well," said Geoffrey leaning forward, as the haughty ministrant drifted away, "you haven't changed a bit. To look at, I mean."

"No?" said Maud.

"You're just the same. I think I"--he squinted down at his waistcoat--"have put on a little weight. I don't know if you notice it?"

Maud shivered again. He thought he had put on a little weight, and

didn't know if she had noticed it! She was oppressed by the eternal melancholy miracle of the fat man who does not realize that he has become fat.

"It was living on the yacht that put me a little out of condition," said Geoffrey. "I was on the yacht nearly all the time since I saw you last. The old boy had a Japanese cook and lived pretty high. It was apoplexy that got him. We had a great time touring about. We were on the Mediterranean all last winter, mostly at Nice."

"I should like to go to Nice," said Maud, for something to say. She was feeling that it was not only externally that Geoffrey had changed. Or had he in reality always been like this, commonplace and prosaic, and was it merely in her imagination that he had been wonderful?

"If you ever go," said Geoffrey, earnestly, "don't fail to lunch at the Hotel Côte d'Azur. They give you the most amazing selection of hors d'oeuvres you ever saw. Crayfish as big as baby lobsters! And there's a fish--I've forgotten it's name, it'll come back to me--that's just like the Florida pompano. Be careful to have it broiled, not fried. Otherwise you lose the flavour. Tell the waiter you must have it broiled, with melted butter and a little parsley and some plain boiled potatoes. It's really astonishing. It's best to stick to fish on the Continent. People can say what they like, but I maintain that the French don't really understand

steaks or any sort of red meat. The veal isn't bad, though I prefer our way of serving it. Of course, what the French are real geniuses at is the omelet. I remember, when we put in at Toulon for coal, I went ashore for a stroll, and had the most delicious omelet with chicken livers beautifully cooked, at quite a small, unpretentious place near the harbour. I shall always remember it."

The mourner returned, bearing a laden tray, from which she removed the funeral bakemeats and placed them limply on the table. Geoffrey shook his head, annoyed.

"I particularly asked for plenty of butter on my toast!" he said. "I hate buttered toast if there isn't lots of butter. It isn't worth eating. Get me a couple of pats, will you, and I'll spread it myself. Do hurry, please, before the toast gets cold. It's no good if the toast gets cold. They don't understand tea as a meal at these places," he said to Maud, as the mourner withdrew. "You have to go to the country to appreciate the real thing. I remember we lay off Lyme Regis down Devonshire way, for a few days, and I went and had tea at a farmhouse there. It was quite amazing! Thick Devonshire cream and home-made jam and cakes of every kind. This sort of thing here is just a farce. I do wish that woman would make haste with that butter. It'll be too late in a minute."

Maud sipped her tea in silence. Her heart was like lead within her. The recurrence of the butter theme as a sort of leit motif in her

companion's conversation was fraying her nerves till she felt she could endure little more. She cast her mind's eye back over the horrid months and had a horrid vision of Geoffrey steadily absorbing butter, day after day, week after week--ever becoming more and more of a human keg. She shuddered.

Indignation at the injustice of Fate in causing her to give her heart to a man and then changing him into another and quite different man fought with a cold terror, which grew as she realized more and more clearly the magnitude of the mistake she had made. She felt that she must escape. And yet how could she escape? She had definitely pledged herself to this man. ("Ah!" cried Geoffrey gaily, as the pats of butter arrived. "That's more like it!" He began to smear the toast. Maud averted her eyes.) She had told him that she loved him, that he was the whole world to her, that there never would be anyone else. He had come to claim her. How could she refuse him just because he was about thirty pounds overweight?

Geoffrey finished his meal. He took out a cigarette. ("No smoking, please!" said the distressed gentlewoman.) He put the cigarette back in its case. There was a new expression in his eyes now, a tender expression. For the first time since they had met Maud seemed to catch a far-off glimpse of the man she had loved in Wales. Butter appeared to have softened Geoffrey.

"So you couldn't wait!" he said with pathos.

Maud did not understand.

"I waited over a quarter of an hour. It was you who were late."

"I don't mean that. I am referring to your engagement. I saw the announcement in the Morning Post. Well, I hope you will let me offer you my best wishes. This Mr. George Bevan, whoever he is, is lucky."

Maud had opened her mouth to explain, to say that it was all a mistake. She closed it again without speaking.

"So you couldn't wait!" proceeded Geoffrey with gentle regret. "Well, I suppose I ought not to blame you. You are at an age when it is easy to forget. I had no right to hope that you would be proof against a few months' separation. I expected too much. But it is ironical, isn't it! There was I, thinking always of those days last summer when we were everything to each other, while you had forgotten me--Forgotten me!" sighed Geoffrey. He picked a fragment of cake absently off the tablecloth and inserted it in his mouth.

The unfairness of the attack stung Maud to speech. She looked back over the months, thought of all she had suffered, and ached with self-pity.

"I hadn't," she cried.

"You hadn't? But you let this other man, this George Bevan, make love to you."

"I didn't! That was all a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Yes. It would take too long to explain, but . . ." She stopped. It had come to her suddenly, in a flash of clear vision, that the mistake was one which she had no desire to correct. She felt like one who, lost in a jungle, comes out after long wandering into the open air. For days she had been thinking confusedly, unable to interpret her own emotions: and now everything had abruptly become clarified. It was as if the sight of Geoffrey had been the key to a cipher. She loved George Bevan, the man she had sent out of her life for ever. She knew it now, and the shock of realization made her feel faint and helpless. And, mingled with the shock of realization, there came to her the mortification of knowing that her aunt, Lady Caroline, and her brother, Percy, had been right after all. What she had mistaken for the love of a lifetime had been, as they had so often insisted, a mere infatuation, unable to survive the spectacle of a Geoffrey who had been eating too much butter and had put on flesh.

Geoffrey swallowed his piece of cake, and bent forward.

"Aren't you engaged to this man Bevan?"

Maud avoided his eye. She was aware that the crisis had arrived, and that her whole future hung on her next words.

And then Fate came to her rescue. Before she could speak, there was an interruption.

"Pardon me," said a voice. "One moment!"

So intent had Maud and her companion been on their own affairs that neither of them observed the entrance of a third party. This was a young man with mouse-coloured hair and a freckled, badly-shaven face which seemed undecided whether to be furtive or impudent. He had small eyes, and his costume was a blend of the flashy and the shabby. He wore a bowler hat, tilted a little rakishly to one side, and carried a small bag, which he rested on the table between them.

"Sorry to intrude, miss." He bowed gallantly to Maud, "but I want to have a few words with Mr. Spenser Gray here."

Maud, looking across at Geoffrey, was surprised to see that his florid face had lost much of its colour. His mouth was open, and his eyes had taken a glassy expression.

"I think you have made a mistake," she said coldly. She disliked the young man at sight. "This is Mr. Raymond."

Geoffrey found speech.

"Of course I'm Mr. Raymond!" he cried angrily. "What do you mean by coming and annoying us like this?"

The young man was not discomposed. He appeared to be used to being unpopular. He proceeded as though there had been no interruption. He produced a dingy card.

"Glance at that," he said. "Messrs. Willoughby and Son, Solicitors. I'm son. The guv'nor put this little matter into my hands. I've been looking for you for days, Mr. Gray, to hand you this paper." He opened the bag like a conjurer performing a trick, and brought out a stiff document of legal aspect. "You're a witness, miss, that I've served the papers. You know what this is, of course?" he said to Geoffrey. "Action for breach of promise of marriage. Our client, Miss Yvonne Sinclair, of the Regal Theatre, is suing you for ten thousand pounds. And, if you ask me," said the young man with genial candour, dropping the professional manner, "I don't mind telling you, I think it's a walk-over! It's the best little action for breach we've handled for years." He became professional again. "Your lawyers will no doubt communicate with us in due course. And,

if you take my advice," he concluded, with another of his swift changes of manner, "you'll get 'em to settle out of court, for, between me and you and the lamp-post, you haven't an earthly!"

Geoffrey had started to his feet. He was puffing with outraged innocence.

"What the devil do you mean by this?" he demanded. "Can't you see you've made a mistake? My name is not Gray. This lady has told you that I am Geoffrey Raymond!"

"Makes it all the worse for you," said the young man imperturbably, "making advances to our client under an assumed name. We've got letters and witnesses and the whole bag of tricks. And how about this photo?" He dived into the bag again. "Do you recognize that, miss?"

Maud looked at the photograph. It was unmistakably Geoffrey. And it had evidently been taken recently, for it showed the later Geoffrey, the man of substance. It was a full-length photograph and across the stout legs was written in a flowing hand the legend, "To Babe from her little Pootles". Maud gave a shudder and handed it back to the young man, just as Geoffrey, reaching across the table, made a grab for it.

"I recognize it," she said.

Mr. Willoughby junior packed the photograph away in his bag, and turned to go.

"That's all for today, then, I think," he said, affably.

He bowed again in his courtly way, tilted the hat a little more to the left, and, having greeted one of the distressed gentlewomen who loitered limply in his path with a polite "If you please, Mabel!" which drew upon him a freezing stare of which he seemed oblivious, he passed out, leaving behind him strained silence.

Maud was the first to break it.

"I think I'll be going," she said.

The words seemed to rouse her companion from his stupor.

"Let me explain!"

"There's nothing to explain."

"It was just a . . . it was just a passing . . . It was nothing . . . nothing."

"Pootles!" murmured Maud.

Geoffrey followed her as she moved to the door.

"Be reasonable!" pleaded Geoffrey. "Men aren't saints! It was nothing! . . . Are you going to end . . . everything . . . just because I lost my head?"

Maud looked at him with a smile. She was conscious of an overwhelming relief. The dim interior of Ye Cosy Nooke no longer seemed depressing. She could have kissed this unknown "Babe" whose businesslike action had enabled her to close a regrettable chapter in her life with a clear conscience.

"But you haven't only lost your head, Geoffrey," she said. "You've lost your figure as well."

She went out quickly. With a convulsive bound Geoffrey started to follow her, but was checked before he had gone a yard.

There are formalities to be observed before a patron can leave Ye Cosy Nooke.

"If you please!" said a distressed gentlewomanly voice.

The lady whom Mr. Willoughby had addressed as Mabel--erroneously, for her name was Ernestine--was standing beside him with a slip of

paper.

"Six and twopence," said Ernestine.

For a moment this appalling statement drew the unhappy man's mind from the main issue.

"Six and twopence for a cup of chocolate and a few cakes?" he cried, aghast. "It's robbery!"

"Six and twopence, please!" said the queen of the bandits with undisturbed calm. She had been through this sort of thing before. Ye Cosy Nooke did not get many customers; but it made the most of those it did get.

"Here!" Geoffrey produced a half-sovereign. "I haven't time to argue!"

The distressed brigand showed no gratification. She had the air of one who is aloof from worldly things. All she wanted was rest and leisure--leisure to meditate upon the body upstairs. All flesh is as grass. We are here today and gone tomorrow. But there, beyond the grave, is peace.

"Your change?" she said.

"Damn the change!"

"You are forgetting your hat."

"Damn my hat!"

Geoffrey dashed from the room. He heaved his body through the door. He lumbered down the stairs.

Out in Bond Street the traffic moved up and the traffic moved down. Strollers strolled upon the sidewalks.

But Maud had gone.