

CHAPTER 27.

In his bedroom at the Carlton Hotel George Bevan was packing. That is to say, he had begun packing; but for the last twenty minutes he had been sitting on the side of the bed, staring into a future which became bleaker and bleaker the more he examined it. In the last two days he had been no stranger to these grey moods, and they had become harder and harder to dispel. Now, with the steamer-trunk before him gaping to receive its contents, he gave himself up whole-heartedly to gloom.

Somehow the steamer-trunk, with all that it implied of partings and voyagings, seemed to emphasize the fact that he was going out alone into an empty world. Soon he would be on board the liner, every revolution of whose engines would be taking him farther away from where his heart would always be. There were moments when the torment of this realization became almost physical.

It was incredible that three short weeks ago he had been a happy man. Lonely, perhaps, but only in a vague, impersonal way. Not lonely with this aching loneliness that tortured him now. What was there left for him? As regards any triumphs which the future might bring in connection with his work, he was, as Mac the stage-door keeper had said, "blarzy". Any success he might have would be but a stale repetition of other successes which he had achieved. He would go on working, of course, but--. The ringing of the telephone bell

across the room jerked him back to the present. He got up with a muttered malediction. Someone calling up again from the theatre probably. They had been doing it all the time since he had announced his intention of leaving for America by Saturday's boat.

"Hello?" he said wearily.

"Is that George?" asked a voice. It seemed familiar, but all female voices sound the same over the telephone.

"This is George," he replied. "Who are you?"

"Don't you know my voice?"

"I do not."

"You'll know it quite well before long. I'm a great talker."

"Is that Billie?"

"It is not Billie, whoever Billie may be. I am female, George."

"So is Billie."

"Well, you had better run through the list of your feminine friends till you reach me."

"I haven't any feminine friends."

"None?"

"That's odd."

"Why?"

"You told me in the garden two nights ago that you looked on me as a pal."

George sat down abruptly. He felt boneless.

"Is--is that you?" he stammered. "It can't be--Maud!"

"How clever of you to guess. George, I want to ask you one or two things. In the first place, are you fond of butter?"

George blinked. This was not a dream. He had just bumped his knee against the corner of the telephone table, and it still hurt most convincingly. He needed the evidence to assure himself that he was awake.

"Butter?" he queried. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, well, if you don't even know what butter means, I expect it's all right. What is your weight, George?"

"About a hundred and eighty pounds. But I don't understand."

"Wait a minute." There was a silence at the other end of the wire.

"About thirteen stone," said Maud's voice. "I've been doing it in my head. And what was it this time last year?"

"About the same, I think. I always weigh about the same."

"How wonderful! George!"

"Yes?"

"This is very important. Have you ever been in Florida?"

"I was there one winter."

"Do you know a fish called the pompano?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

"How do you mean? It's just a fish. You eat it."

"I know. Go into details."

"There aren't any details. You just eat it."

The voice at the other end of the wire purred with approval. "I never heard anything so splendid. The last man who mentioned pompano to me became absolutely lyrical about sprigs of parsley and melted butter. Well, that's that. Now, here's another very important point. How about wall-paper?"

George pressed his unoccupied hand against his forehead. This conversation was unnerving him.

"I didn't get that," he said.

"Didn't get what?"

"I mean, I didn't quite catch what you said that time. It sounded to me like 'What about wall-paper?'"

"It was 'What about wall-paper?' Why not?"

"But," said George weakly, "it doesn't make any sense."

"Oh, but it does. I mean, what about wall-paper for your den?"

"My den?"

"Your den. You must have a den. Where do you suppose you're going to work, if you don't? Now, my idea would be some nice quiet grass-cloth. And, of course, you would have lots of pictures and books. And a photograph of me. I'll go and be taken specially. Then there would be a piano for you to work on, and two or three really comfortable chairs. And--well, that would be about all, wouldn't it?"

George pulled himself together.

"Hello!" he said.

"Why do you say 'Hello'?"

"I forgot I was in London. I should have said 'Are you there?'"

"Yes, I'm here."

"Well, then, what does it all mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"What you've been saying--about butter and pompanos and wall-paper

and my den and all that? I don't understand."

"How stupid of you! I was asking you what sort of wall-paper you would like in your den after we were married and settled down."

George dropped the receiver. It clashed against the side of the table. He groped for it blindly.

"Hello!" he said.

"Don't say 'Hello!' It sounds so abrupt!"

"What did you say then?"

"I said 'Don't say Hello!'"

"No, before that! Before that! You said something about getting married."

"Well, aren't we going to get married? Our engagement is announced in the Morning Post."

"But--But--"

"George!" Maud's voice shook. "Don't tell me you are going to jilt me!" she said tragically. "Because, if you are, let me know in

time, as I shall want to bring an action for breach of promise. I've just met such a capable young man who will look after the whole thing for me. He wears a bowler hat on the side of his head and calls waitresses 'Mabel'. Answer 'yes' or 'no'. Will you marry me?"

"But--But--how about--I mean, what about--I mean how about--?"

"Make up your mind what you do mean."

"The other fellow!" gasped George.

A musical laugh was wafted to him over the wire.

"What about him?"

"Well, what about him?" said George.

"Isn't a girl allowed to change her mind?" said Maud.

George yelped excitedly. Maud gave a cry.

"Don't sing!" she said. "You nearly made me deaf."

"Have you changed your mind?"

"Certainly I have!"

"And you really think--You really want--I mean, you really want--You really think--"

"Don't be so incoherent!"

"Maud!"

"Well?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Of course I will."

"Gosh!"

"What did you say?"

"I said Gosh! And listen to me, when I say Gosh, I mean Gosh! Where are you? I must see you. Where can we meet? I want to see you! For Heaven's sake, tell me where you are. I want to see you! Where are you? Where are you?"

"I'm downstairs."

"Where? Here at the 'Carlton'?"

"Here at the 'Carlton'!"

"Alone?"

"Quite alone."

"You won't be long!" said George.

He hung up the receiver, and bounded across the room to where his coat hung over the back of a chair. The edge of the steamer-trunk caught his shin.

"Well," said George to the steamer-trunk, "and what are you butting in for? Who wants you, I should like to know!"