

A Foolish Young Man;

Or, the Belle of the Season.

CHAPTER XXX.

It was hot at Wood Green; but it was hotter still in Mayfair, where the season was drawing to a close with all the signs of a long-spun-out and exhausting dissolution. Women were waxing pale under the prolonged strain of entertainments which for the last week or two had been matters of duty rather than pleasure, and many a girl who had entered the lists of society a blushing and hopeful debutante with perhaps a ducal coronet in her mind's eye, was beginning to think she would have to be content with, say, the simpler one of a vicountess; or even to wed with no coronet at all. Many of the men were down at Cowes or golfing at St. Andrews; and these unfortunates who were detained in attendance at the House which continued to sit, like a "broody hen," as Howard said, longed and sighed for the coming of the magic two o'clock August before which date they assured themselves the House must rise and so bring about their long-delayed holiday.

But one man showed no sign of weariness or a desire for rest; Sir Stephen's step was light and buoyant as ever on the hot pavement of Pall Mall, and on the still hotter one of the City; his face was as cheery, his manner as gay, and his voice as bright and free from care as those of a young man.

There is no elixir like success; and Sir Stephen was drinking deeply of the delicious draught. He had been well known for years; he was famous now. You could not open a newspaper without coming upon his name in the City article, and in the fashionable intelligence. Now it was a report of the meeting of some great company, at which Sir Stephen had presided, at another time it occurred in a graphic account of a big party at the house he had rented in Grosvenor Square. It was a huge marriage, the rent ran into many figures; but, as Howard remarked, it did not matter; Sir Stephen was rich enough to rent every house in the square. Sir Stephen had taken over the army of servants and lived in a state which was little short of princely.

Indeed, it was necessary that he should be present and in attendance on his fiancée who appeared at every function. Maude was now almost as celebrated as Sir Stephen; for her beauty, her reputed wealth, and the fact that she was engaged to the son of Sir Stephen, had raised her to an exalted position in the fashionable world; and her name figured in the newspapers very nearly as often as that of the great financier. She had stepped from obscurity into that notoriety, for which we all of us have such a morbid craving, almost in a single day; and she quened it with a languid grace and self-possession which established her position on a firm basis. Wherever she went she was the centre and object of a small crowd of courtiers; the men admired her, and the women envied her; for nowadays most women would rather marry wealth than rank, unless the latter were accompanied by a long and distinguished list of titles for landlords, too many English noblemen have no rent roll at all, short or long.

Excepting his father's, Stafford went to very few houses, and spent most of his time, when not in attendance on Maude, in the solitude of his own chambers, or in the smoking-room of one of the quietest of his clubs. Short as the time had been, the matter of a few weeks only since he had parted from Ida, he had greatly changed; so changed that not seldom the bright and buoyant and overbright Sir Stephen seemed to be younger than his son. He was too busy, too absorbed in the pursuit of his ambition, the skillful steering of the enterprise he had so successfully launched to notice the change; but it was noticed by others, and especially by Howard. Often he watched Stafford moving moodily about his father's crowded rooms, the impatient air with which men wear when they have some secret trouble or anxiety which they conceal as the Spartan boy concealed the fox which was gnawing at his vitals; or Howard came upon him in the corner of a half-darkened smoking-room, with an expired cigar in his lips, and his eyes fixed on a newspaper which was never turned.

By that unwritten code by which we are all governed nowadays, Howard could not obtrude by questioning his friend, and Stafford showed no signs of making any voluntary statement or explanation. He suffered in a silence with which he kept at arm's-length even his closest friend; and Howard pondered and worried in a futile attempt to guess at the trouble which had changed Stafford from a light-hearted man with an immense capacity for enjoying himself to the morose individual to whom the pleasures of life seemed absolutely distasteful.

One afternoon Howard sauntered into Stafford's room and found him sitting in his easy-chair with a book turned face downwards on his knee, and his pipe in his mouth. Tiny, the black-and-tan terrier, who was lying coiled up on a cushion at his master's feet, heard Howard step on the stairs and barked sharply for a moment, then glancing at Stafford, with a reassuring air, coiled himself up again and whines of welcome; for the mite was fond of Howard.

"Asleep, Staff?" he asked, as he dropped his hat on the table and sank on to the couch. "By Jove, you have the best of it in here—it is out of the sun, at any rate. How that dog can lie on a stuffy cushion! I thought you were going down to Lady Brook's, at Richmond, this afternoon?"

"Was it this afternoon?" said Stafford. "I'd forgotten. I'm sorry; but my father will be there and will look after Maude."

Howard glanced at the weary-looking face as he helped himself to a cigarette. "You're well out of it! A lady who would give a garden-party on such an afternoon as this, is, indeed, la belle dame sans merci! Good heavens! when I think of the suffering votaries of fashion undergo in one season, I've no pity left for the benighted Hindoo women who sacrifice themselves to Juggernaut. Which reminds me that there is a tremendous swagman function on at Clarendon House to-night, isn't there?"

Stafford nodded, and replied and relit his pipe.

"Yes," he said. "I had forgotten it; but Maude sent me round a note to remind me of it, and, of course, I must. I envy you, Howard; you can stay away."

"That's what I can't do," said Howard with a whimsical smile. "I am drawn to the vortex; I am dragged at the chariot wheels of that wonderful father of yours. I am the victim of a peculiar kind of fascination which is as irresistible as the mesmeric influence or hypnotism. I feel towards Sir Stephen as I should feel towards Napoleon the Great, if he were alive. I follow and gaze at him, so to speak, with my mouth agape and a fatuous smile over a countenance which I at

once flattered myself was intelligent. I am dazed, bewildered by his genius, his audacity, his marvellous courage and resource. Do you know, Stafford, I think it would be an excellent idea to abolish the House of Lords, the House of Commons, the monarchical government, and place the whole business in the hands of a board to be presided over by Sir Stephen."

Stafford drew at his pipe grimly and said nothing, and Howard went on in the gentle monotone characteristic of him:

"By the way, the mysterious and proverbial little bird, has whispered to me that Sir Stephen will not be Sir Stephen much longer. In fact, that they are going to make a peer of him very shortly. And upon my word they couldn't find a better man for the place; for, unlike some noble lord you and I could mention, Staff, he will wear his robes and coronet—do they ever wear them now?—right nobly; and for once the House of Lords will get a man who knows his own mind, knows what he wants and the way to get it. And if you won't take offence, Staff, and throw things at me, I should like to remark that his son will prove a worthy successor. Can you fancy yourself in a peer's robe with a velvet-lined coronet, Staff?"

Stafford grunted for reply, and there was silence for a minute, during which Howard turned over the pages of one of the illustrated weeklies which lay on the table, and suddenly he looked up and exclaimed:

"Have you seen this?"

Stafford shook his head.

"I mean this portrait of Miss Falconer," said Howard, in a low voice. "It is wonderfully good," he went on, as he contemplated the full-length picture; "wonderfully like her."

He handed the paper across and Stafford looked at it. It was an admirable reproduction of a photograph of Maude in evening-dress, and made a truly splendid picture; and looking at it, one felt instantly how well a coronet, even a ducal one, would fit those level brows, beneath which the eyes looked out upon the world with a scarcely masked hauteur and disdain. A man might well be proud of such a woman for his future wife; but there was no pride in Stafford's face as his eyes dwelt moodily on the almost perfect face, the tall, svelte figure in its long-trained robe. The splendor of her beauty oppressed him with a sense of shame; and with an involuntary exclamation, which sounded something like a groan, he let the paper slip from his hand, and drooped still lower in his chair. The sight of him was more than Howard could bear in silence, and he rose and laid a hand upon Stafford's shoulder.

"What's wrong, old man?" he enquired in a very low voice. "You are out of sorts; you've been off color for some time past. Of course, I've noticed it. I've seen the look you wear on your face now come over it at moments when you ought to have been at your best and brightest. I've seen a look in your eyes when your lips have been smiling and your face was uncomfortable. In short, Staff, you are getting on my nerves, and although I know it's like my cheek to mention the matter, and that you'll probably curse my impudence, I really should be grateful if you'd tell me what ails you, still more grateful if you'd tell me what you'd like to get rid of. I know I'm an interfering idiot, but I'm fool enough to be fond of you—it's about the only weakness I've got, and I am ashamed of it; but there it is."

He laughed with a touch of self-contempt, with an attempt at his old cynicism; but Stafford understood the factitious character of the laugh, and as he leant his chin in his hand, he gave a short nod of acknowledgment.

"Howard, do you remember that time when you and I were at Palermo?" he said, in a low voice, and as if he were communing with himself rather than answering his friend. "Do you remember that Italian we met there; the man who seemed so gay and careless, the man who appeared to have everything a fellow could desire, and to be the embodiment of prosperity and success? Do you remember how once or twice you and I saw a strange look on his face, even while he was at dinner or fooling with the women in the salon—a look as if he had suddenly remembered something, as if something had flashed upon his mind in the midst of the laughter and music and brought him face to face with hell? You pointed him out to me one night, and we wondered what was the matter with him—until he fell off his horse that day you and I were riding with him? Do you remember how, when we had unbuttoned his riding-shirt, we found the 'D' that had been branded on his chest? We knew then what was the matter with him; he had been a deserter. The pain of that hot iron had died out long ago, but the scar remained. He was no longer a common soldier, but rich and prosperous, a social success with, perhaps, his ambition gratified; but the 'D' was there all the time, and every now and then, even while he was 'enjoying' himself, he could feel the hot iron burning into his flesh, and he knew within the miserable little soul of him that he was a cur and a coward; that driven by fate, perhaps by some devilish accident of circumstance, he had lost his honor and sold himself to the devil."

Howard's face went pale and grave.

"I don't see where the application comes in, Staff," he said. "I don't see that anything in your case—position, resembles that poor wretch."

Stafford rose, his face grim and stern.

"No; and I can't show you, Howard," he said. "Do you think that poor devil would have bared his breast and shown that 'D' to even his dearest friend? Good gracious, man, why do you badger me! Am I to wear the cap and bells always, do you expect me to, dancing like a clown, every moment of the day? Do I not play my part as well as I can? Who gave you the right to peer and pry?"

He recovered suddenly from the fit of fury and gripped Howard's arm as he almost shrank back from the burst of despairing rage.



British Cycle Corps, with its Colt Gun, Forging a Stream En Route to Join the Main Corps.

Howard nodded, and speaking with his usual drawl, said:

"Wake and call me early, mother. I will be there in good time. Miss Falconer does me the great honor of permitting me to flatter myself that I am sometimes of some slight service to her. I imagine it is something about the cotillon, concerning which I am absolutely ignorant, and am therefore capable of offering any amount of advice, I am a whale at giving advice, and my only consolation is that no one is ever foolish enough to follow it; so that I can humor my little fibble without suffering the terrors of responsibility. Au revoir, my dear Stafford, until this evening. Good-bye, Tiny! What a selfish little beast it is; he won't even raise his head!"

Stafford laughed and picked up the dog by the scruff of his neck, and it nestled against him lovingly, and licked his cheek. Howard went downstairs, still putting on his gloves, and as he opened the door, he swore under his breath fervently.

CHAPTER XXXI.

In obedience to Miss Falconer's command, Howard presented himself at Clarendon House at a comparatively early hour that evening. There were some of them Lady Clansford, who was still obliging enough to play the part of presiding genius; but they were all resting, or dressing for the ball, and the drawing-room, into which a couple of superbly liveried footmen showed Howard, was empty. For the first time he heard the frou-frou of satin, and Maude Falconer swept in; her beauty, the splendor of her dress, the flashing of the diamonds in her hair and on her neck and arms, her queenly presence, almost made Howard catch his breath.

She came in with a languid grace, the air of a debutante which suited her so well, but as she saw that Howard was alone, the languor and the hauteur almost disappeared, and she came forward and gave him her hand, and he saw a look on her face which reminded him of that upon the ill-fated Italian, though it was not so. For the first time he noticed a shade of anxiety on the level brow, something like a pathetic curve in the perfectly moulded lips; and he fancied that the gloved hand, which he held for a moment quivered.

"Is Stafford not with you?" she asked, "though I was coming early. His father expected him."

"No, I came alone," replied Howard. "But no doubt Stafford will be here presently."

She stood, calm and statuesque, but with her eyes downcast for a moment, then she raised them and looked at him. "About this cotillon," she said; then she broke off: "Do you know what is going to happen to-night? It is a secret, but—but I feel as if I must tell you, though I am betraying Sir Stephen's confidence. He tells me everything—more than he tells even Stafford. Strange as it may seem, for he is fond of me."

"That does not seem strange to me," said Howard, with a little bow.

"He made a slight gesture of impatience. "It seems extraordinary to me," she said, with a touch of bitterness. "So few persons are fond of me."

"Howard smiled.

"For once I must be guilty of contradicting a lady," he said. "When I reflect that to-night I shall form one of a band of devoted courtiers who will throng round you in the hopeless pangs of despair—"

She repeated the gesture of impatience. "Have you seen Stafford to-day?" she asked, looking down.

"I saw him a few hours ago," he replied, "at his rooms."

"At his rooms," she repeated, with a slight frown and a quick glance. "He promised to come to Richmond. Why did he not do so? Is he ill?"

"No," said Howard, raising his brows and smiling, for he knew the meaning of loyalty to a friend. "I never saw him in better spirits in my life, he was quite hilarious."

Her eyes flashed upon him keenly, but he met them with his slow, cynical smile.

"He must have been very different to what he usually is," she said. "I have not seen him laugh since—since we left Bryndermere." Her lips came tightly together, and she looked at him and then away from him. "Mr. Howard, you are his friend, his closest friend, I want you to tell me—But, no; you would not speak if you were on the rack, would you? No one sees, no one speaks; it is only I who, always watching him, see that there is something wrong. And I—I am so helpless!"

The outburst was so unlike her, the dropping of the mask of pride and self-possession was so sudden that Howard was startled; but no sign of his emotion revealed itself upon the placid face upon which his serene smile did not waver for an instant.

"I think you are availing yourself of a lady's privilege and indulging in a fancy, Miss Falconer," he said. "Stafford is perfectly well, and, of course, we left Bryndermere together, and he looked at me and then away from me. 'Mr. Howard, you are his friend, his closest friend, I want you to tell me—But, no; you would not speak if you were on the rack, would you? No one sees, no one speaks; it is only I who, always watching him, see that there is something wrong. And I—I am so helpless!'"

She checked a sigh, as if she understood that it was useless to appeal to him, and after a pause Howard said:

"You haven't told me the great secret yet."

till this afternoon and the formalities were not completed. I think it will be announced to-night."

(To be continued.)

"GAY GORDONS" IN BATTLE

WERE IN FOUR ENGAGEMENTS IN FIVE DAYS.

After That Only 170 of Regiment Answered to Their Names.

From a letter penned by one of England's wounded heroes in Alexandra Hospital, Cosham, Hants, England, a lucid idea is obtained of the spirit of intense patriotism which actuates every officer and man of Great Britain's forces in the field. The letter was written by Samuel Smiley, one of the pitifully meagre remnant of what was one of the nation's crack regiments of the line, the Gordon Highlanders, known throughout the service as "the gay and gallant Gordons." It appears that more than seventy-five per cent. of the command either perished or were wounded in the first fierce fighting on Belgian soil. Some extracts follows:—

Hurricane of Shell.

"At Mons I got a crack on the knee with a shrapnel splinter. I knew nothing of it until my officer pointed it out to me. I dug it out with a pen knife and now I assure you I feel no ill effects. Of course there is a wound, but I'll be surprised if it is not healed within a week."

"I'll tell you about the fighting at Mons, but I have absolutely no coherent recollection of Cambrai. The hurricane of shell there has left me benumbed, and I do not yet realize that I am home. We marched out of our billets at four o'clock in the morning and took up a position on the main Paris road. Mons itself was somewhat half left on our rear."

"We then dug our trenches, and much labor and love we put into the work. The ball opened at half-past eleven with a terrible artillery duel, the German shells bursting over our trenches. Our company, D, with company B on our left, held the right side of the road. Company C was in advance and the Middlesex regiment and the Royal Irish held the cross roads to our left flank in the direction of Mons. The artillery fire was continued for several hours, until a movement of infantry was observed which was evidently intended for the Gordons."

Simply Blasted Away.

"They occupied the wood to our left front. We opened on them with a terrific Maxim fire. Poor devils, they advanced in companies of quite 150 men in files five deep. As our rifle has a flat trajectory up to 600 yards; you can guess the result. We could steady our rifles on the trenches and take deliberate aim. The first company of them was simply blasted away by a volley of 700 yards, and in their insane formation every bullet was sure to find two billets."

"The other companies kept advancing very slowly, with their dead comrades as cover, but they had absolutely no chance, and at about five o'clock their infantry retired. We were still being subjected to a terrible artillery fire—God! how their artillery do fire!—but we had time to observe what was hap-

pening on our left flank. The Royal Irish regiment had been surprised and fearfully cut up, and so, too, had the Middlesex.

Beggars Description.

"Then followed a scene which beggars description by me. We crept from our trenches and crossed to the other side of the road, where we had the benefit of a ditch for cover. We made excellent progress until one hundred and fifty yards from the cross roads. There was a small white house flush with the road, standing in a clearing. Our young subaltern was leading and safely crossed the front of the house. Immediately the Germans opened a hellish storm of shrapnel at the house. They could not see us, but I guess they knew why troops should pass there. However, our orders were to relieve the Royal Irish, and, astounding as it may seem, we passed that house, and I was the only one to be hit. Even yet I am amazed at our luck."

"By this time the dusk had set in. Four villages were on fire and the Germans were still shelling the plucky Royal Irish. The dead and wounded were all around us. We repulsed a very faint-hearted Uhlan attack, and about 9 p.m. came our orders to retire. What a pitiful handful we were against the German host, and yet we held the flower of their army at bay all day."

"As you know, we created Cain among the Germans at Mons on that Sunday and beat them, too. They were in far too strong force for us and we just had to retire."

Their "Busy Days."

"At four o'clock on Monday morning they attacked us again, so we left the milk (.303) on the doorstep and retired again. Two fights and fifteen miles in thirty-six hours. On Tuesday at two-thirty p.m. the Gordons were sent to oust some German infantry from a position on our left front. We had to cross a large turnip field and I twisted my bad ankle. It was a fine state of affairs, and my company officer got me a seat on the limber of the 128th battery, Royal Field Artillery. I had not been up ten minutes before they galloped into action with me. I was beginning to feel the reverse of cheerful when, after they fired a few rounds, we got our orders to make our getaway."

"We got. By this time the Gordons had disappeared, so went on to Cambrai. It was late when we got in, and I was told my regiment was some four miles off. I then decided to join some other lot and try to get to the 'Jocks' in the morning."

Made the Best of It

"Accordingly I attached myself to the Royal Scots Fusiliers, B Company. At six-thirty on Wednesday morning, as they were going into action, I thought I might as well make the best of it, so I went into action with them. I fought all that day and marched all night, and when eight o'clock Thursday morning came I saw all that was left of the gallant and gay Gordons—170 men answered their names. God knows how many more were alive. I joined up there and carried on retiring until we arrived at Noyon. Four engagements and fifty miles in five days."

"I was compelled to go sick there. The pain in my leg was unbearable and the doctor banged me on a Red Cross train and sent me to Rouen. I was there an hour when came the command, 'Hurry up, hurry up, we've got to quit,' so we were chivvied up to Havre, and, well, there you are."