

CHAPTER XV

UNCLE DONALD SPEAKS HIS MIND

THERE is in certain men—and Bruce Carmyle was one of them—a quality of resilience, a sturdy refusal to acknowledge defeat, which aids them as effectively in affairs of the heart as in encounters of a sterner and more practical kind. As a wooer, Bruce Carmyle resembled that durable type of pugilist who can only give of his best after he has received at least one substantial wallop on some tender spot. Although Sally had refused his offer of marriage quite definitely at Monk's Crofton, it had never occurred to him to consider the episode closed. All his life he had been accustomed to getting what he wanted, and he meant to get it now.

He was quite sure that he wanted Sally. There had been moments when he had been conscious of certain doubts, but in the smart of temporary defeat these had vanished. That streak of Bohemianism in her which from time to time since their first meeting had jarred upon his orderly mind was forgotten; and all that Mr. Carmyle could remember was the brightness of her eyes, the jaunty lift of her chin, and the gallant trimness of her. Her gay prettiness seemed to flick at him like a whip in the darkness of wakeful nights,

lashing him to pursuit. And quietly and methodically, like a respectable wolf settling on the trail of a Red Riding Hood, he prepared to pursue. Delicacy and imagination might have kept him back, but in these qualities he had never been strong. One cannot have everything.

His preparations for departure, though he did his best to make them swiftly and secretly, did not escape the notice of the Family. In many English families there seems to exist a system of inter-communication and news-distribution like that of those savage tribes in Africa who pass the latest item of news and interest from point to point over miles of intervening jungle by some telepathic method never properly explained. On his last night in London, there entered to Bruce Carmyle at his apartment in South Audley Street, the Family's chosen representative, the man to whom the Family pointed with pride—Uncle Donald, in the flesh.

There were two hundred and forty pounds of the flesh Uncle Donald was in, and the chair in which he deposited it creaked beneath its burden. Once, at Monk's Crofton, Sally had spoiled a whole morning for her brother Fillmore, by indicating Uncle Donald as the exact image of what he would be when he grew up. A superstition, cherished from early schooldays, that he had a weak heart had caused the Family's managing director to abstain from every form of exercise for nearly fifty years; and, as he combined with a distaste for exercise one of the three heartiest appetites in the south-western postal division of London, Uncle Donald, at sixty-two, was not a man one would willingly have lounging in one's armchairs. Bruce Carmyle's customary respectfulness was tinged

with something approaching dislike as he looked at him.

Uncle Donald's walrus moustache heaved gently upon his laboured breath, like seaweed on a groundswell. There had been stairs to climb.

"What's this? What's this?" he contrived to ejaculate at last. "You packing?"

"Yes," said Mr. Carmyle, shortly. For the first time in his life he was conscious of that sensation of furtive guilt which was habitual with his cousin Ginger when in the presence of this large, mackerel-eyed man.

"You going away?"

"Yes."

"Where you going?"

"America."

"When you going?"

"To-morrow morning."

"Why you going?"

This dialogue has been set down as though it had been as brisk and snappy as any cross-talk between vaudeville comedians, but in reality Uncle Donald's peculiar methods of conversation had stretched it over a period of nearly three minutes: for after each reply and before each question he had puffed and sighed and inhaled his moustache with such painful deliberation that his companion's nerves were finding it difficult to bear up under the strain.

"You're going after that girl," said Uncle Donald, accusingly.

Bruce Carmyle flushed darkly. And it is interesting to record that at this moment there flitted through his mind the thought that Ginger's behaviour at Bleke's Coffee House, on a certain notable occasion,

had not been so utterly inexcusable as he had supposed. There was no doubt that the Family's Chosen One could be trying.

"Will you have a whisky and soda, Uncle Donald?" he said, by way of changing the conversation.

"Yes," said his relative, in pursuance of a vow he had made in the early 'eighties never to refuse an offer of this kind. "Gimme!"

You would have thought that that would have put matters on a pleasanter footing. But no. Having lapped up the restorative, Uncle Donald returned to the attack quite unsoftened.

"Never thought you were a fool before," he said severely.

Bruce Carmyle's proud spirit chafed. This sort of interview, which had become a commonplace with his cousin Ginger, was new to him. Hitherto, his actions had received neither criticism nor been subjected to it.

"I'm not a fool."

"You *are* a fool. A dam fool," continued Uncle Donald, specifying more exactly. "Don't like the girl. Never did. Not a nice girl. Didn't like her. Right from the first."

"Need we discuss this?" said Bruce Carmyle, dropping, as he was apt to do, into the grand manner.

The Head of the Family drank in a layer of moustache and blew it out again.

"Need we discuss it?" he said with asperity. "We're *going* to discuss it! Whatch think I climbed all these blasted stairs for with my weak heart? Gimme another!"

Mr. Carmyle gave him another.

"'S a bad business," moaned Uncle Donald,

having gone through the movements once more. "Shooking bad business. If your poor father were alive, whatch think he'd say to your tearing across the world after this girl? I'll tell you what he'd say. He'd say . . . What kind of whisky's this?"

"O'Rafferty Special."

"New to me. Not bad. Quite good. Sound. Mellow. Wherej get it?"

"Bilby's in Oxford Street."

"Must order some. Mellow. He'd say . . . well, God knows *what* he'd say. Whatch doing it for? Whatch doing it *for*? That's what I can't see. None of us can see. Puzzles your uncle George. Baffles your aunt Geraldine. Nobody can understand it. Girl's simply after your money. Anyone can see that."

"Pardon me, Uncle Donald," said Mr. Carmyle, stiffly, "but that is surely rather absurd. If that were the case, why should she have refused me at Monk's Crofton?"

"Drawing you on," said Uncle Donald, promptly. "Luring you on. Well-known trick. Girl in 1881, when I was at Oxford, tried to lure *me* on. If I hadn't had some sense and a weak heart . . . Whatch know of this girl? Whatch *know* of her? That's the point. Who *is* she? Wherej meet her?"

"I met her at Roville, in France."

"Travelling with her family?"

"Travelling alone," said Bruce Carmyle, reluctantly.

"Not even with that brother of hers? Bad!" said Uncle Donald. "Bad, bad!"

"American girls are accustomed to more independence than English girls."

"That young man," said Uncle Donald, pursuing a train of thought, "is going to be *fat* one of these days, if he doesn't lock out. Travelling alone, was she? What did you do? Catch her eye on the pier?"

"Really, Uncle Donald!"

"Well, must have got to know her somehow."

"I was introduced to her by Lancelot. She was a friend of his."

"Lancelot!" exploded Uncle Donald, quivering all over like a smitten jelly at the loathed name. "Well, that shows you what sort of a girl she is. Any girl that would be a friend of . . . Unpack!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Unpack! Mustn't go on with this foolery. Out of the question. Find some girl make you a good wife. Your aunt Mary's been meeting some people name of Bassington-Bassington, related Kent Bassington-Bassingtons . . . eldest daughter charming girl, just do for you."

Outside the pages of the more old-fashioned type of fiction nobody ever really ground his teeth, but Bruce Carmyle came nearer to it at that moment than anyone had ever come before. He scowled blackly, and the last trace of suavity left him.

"I shall do nothing of the kind," he said briefly. "I sail to-morrow."

Uncle Donald had had a previous experience of being defied by a nephew, but it had not accustomed him to the sensation. He was aware of an unpleasant feeling of impotence. Nothing is harder than to know what to do next when defied.

"Eh?" he said.

Mr. Carmyle having started to defy, evidently decided to make a good job of it.

"I am over twenty-one," said he. "I am financially independent. I shall do as I please."

"But, consider!" pleaded Uncle Donald, painfully conscious of the weakness of his words. "Reflect!"

"I have reflected."

"Your position in the county . . ."

"I've thought of that."

"You could marry anyone you pleased."

"I'm going to."

"You are determined to go running off to God-knows-where after this Miss I-can't-even-remember-her-dam-name?"

"Yes."

"Have you considered," said Uncle Donald, portentously, "that you owe a duty to the Family?"

Bruce Carmyle's patience snapped and he sank like a stone to absolutely Gingerian depths of plain-spokenness.

"Oh, damn the Family!" he cried.

There was a painful silence, broken only by the relieved sigh of the armchair as Uncle Donald heaved himself out of it.

"After that," said Uncle Donald, "I have nothing more to say."

"Good!" said Mr. Carmyle rudely, lost to all shame.

"'Cept this. If you come back married to that girl, I'll cut you in Piccadilly. By George, I will!"

He moved to the door. Bruce Carmyle looked down his nose without speaking. A tense moment.

"What," asked Uncle Donald, his fingers on the handle, "did you say it was called?"

"What was what called?"

“ That whisky.”

“ O’Rafferty Special.”

“ And wherj get it? ”

“ Bilby’s, in Oxford Street.”

“ I’ll make a note of it,” said Uncle Donald.