

CHAPTER IV

GINGER IN DANGEROUS MOOD

SOME few days later, owing to the fact that the latter, being preoccupied, did not see him first, Bruce Carmyle met his cousin Lancelot in Piccadilly. They had returned by different routes from Renville, and Ginger would have preferred the separation to continue. He was hurrying on with a nod, when Carmyle stopped him.

“Just the man I wanted to see,” he observed.

“Oh, hullo!” said Ginger without joy.

“I was thinking of calling at your club.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Cigarette?”

Ginger peered at the proffered case with the vague suspicion of the man who has allowed himself to be lured on to the platform and is accepting a card from the conjurer. He felt bewildered. In all the years of their acquaintance he could not recall another such exhibition of geniality on his cousin's part. He was surprised, indeed, at Mr. Carmyle's speaking to him at all, for the *affaire* Scrymgeour remained an unhealed wound, and the Family, Ginger knew, were even now in session upon it.

“Been back in London long?”

“Day or two.”

"I heard quite by accident that you had returned and that you were staying at the club. By the way, thank you for introducing me to Miss Nicholas."

Ginger started violently.

"What!"

"I was in that compartment, you know, at Renville Station. You threw her right on top of me. We agreed to consider that an introduction. An attractive girl."

Bruce Carmyle had not entirely made up his mind regarding Sally, but on one point he was clear, that she should not, if he could help it, pass out of his life. Her abrupt departure had left him with that baffled and dissatisfied feeling which, though it has little in common with love at first sight, frequently produces the same effects. She had had, he could not disguise it from himself, the better of their late encounter; and he was conscious of a desire to meet her again and show her that there was more in him than she apparently supposed. Bruce Carmyle, in a word, was piqued: and, though he could not quite decide whether he liked or disliked Sally, he was very sure that a future without her would have an element of flatness.

"A very attractive girl. We had a very pleasant talk."

"I bet you did," said Ginger enviously.

"By the way, she did not give you her address by any chance?"

"Why?" said Ginger suspiciously. His attitude towards Sally's address resembled somewhat that of a connoisseur who has acquired a unique work of art. He wanted to keep it to himself and gloat over it.

"Well, I—er—I promised to send her some books she was anxious to read. . . ."

"I shouldn't think she gets much time for reading."

"Books which are not published in America."

"Oh, pretty nearly everything is published in America, what? Bound to be, I mean."

"Well, these particular books are not," said Mr. Carmyle shortly. He was finding Ginger's reserve a little trying, and wished that he had been more inventive.

"Give them to me and I'll send them to her," suggested Ginger.

"Good Lord, man!" snapped Mr. Carmyle. "I'm capable of sending a few books to America. Where does she live?"

Ginger revealed the sacred number of the holy street which had the luck to be Sally's headquarters. He did it because with a persistent devil like his cousin there seemed no way of getting out of it: but he did it grudgingly.

"Thanks." Bruce Carmyle wrote the information down with a gold pencil in a dapper little morocco-bound notebook. He was the sort of man who always has a pencil, and the backs of old envelopes never enter into his life.

There was a pause. Bruce Carmyle coughed.

"I saw Uncle Donald this morning," he said.

His manner had lost its geniality. There was no need for it now, and he was a man who objected to waste. He spoke coldly, and in his voice there was a familiar sub-tingle of reproof.

"Yes?" said Ginger moodily. This was the uncle in whose office he had made his debut as a hasher: a

worthy man, highly respected in the National Liberal Club, but never a favourite of Ginger's. There were other minor uncles and a few subsidiary aunts who went to make up the Family, but Uncle Donald was unquestionably the managing director of that body and it was Ginger's considered opinion that in this capacity he approximated to a human blister.

"He wants you to dine with him to-night at Bleke's."

Ginger's depression deepened. A dinner with Uncle Donald would hardly have been a cheerful function, even in the surroundings of a banquet in the Arabian Nights. There was that about Uncle Donald's personality which would have cast a sobering influence over the orgies of the Emperor Tiberius at Capri. To dine with him at a morgue like that relic of Old London, Bleke's Coffee House, which confined its custom principally to regular patrons who had not missed an evening there for half a century, was to touch something very near bed-rock. Ginger was extremely doubtful whether flesh and blood were equal to it.

"To-night?" he said. "Oh, you mean to-night? Well . . ."

"Don't be a fool. You know as well as I do that you've got to go." Uncle Donald's invitations were royal commands in the Family. "If you've another engagement you must put it off."

"Oh, all right."

"Seven-thirty sharp."

"All right," said Ginger gloomily.

The two men went their ways, Bruce Carmyle eastwards because he had clients to see in his chambers at the Temple; Ginger westwards because Mr.

Carmyle had gone east. There was little sympathy between these cousins: yet, oddly enough, their thoughts as they walked centred on the same object. Bruce Carmyle, threading his way briskly through the crowds of Piccadilly Circus, was thinking of Sally: and so was Ginger as he loafe aimlessly towards Hyde Park Corner, bumping in a sort of coma from pedestrian to pedestrian.

Since his return to London Ginger had been in bad shape. He mooned through the days and slept poorly at night. If there is one thing rottener than another in a pretty blighted world, one thing which gives a fellow the pip and reduces him to the condition of an absolute onion, it is hopeless love. Hopeless love had got Ginger all stirred up. His had been hitherto a placid soul. Even the financial crash which had so altered his life had not bruised him very deeply. His temperament had enabled him to bear the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune with a philosophic "Right ho!" But now everything seemed different. Things irritated him acutely, which before he had accepted as inevitable—his Uncle Donald's moustache, for instance, and its owner's habit of employing it during meals as a sort of zareba or earthwork against the assaults of soup.

"By gad!" thought Ginger, stopping suddenly opposite Devonshire House. "If he uses that damned shrubbery as soup-strainer to-night, I'll slosh him with a fork!"

Hard thoughts . . . hard thoughts! And getting harder all the time, for nothing grows more quickly than a mood of rebellion. Rebellion is a forest fire that flames across the soul. The spark had been lighted in Ginger, and long before he reached Hyde

Park Corner he was ablaze and crackling. By the time he returned to his club he was practically a menace to society—to that section of it, at any rate, which embraced his Uncle Donald, his minor uncles George and William, and his aunts Mary, Geraldine, and Louise.

Nor had the mood passed when he began to dress for the dismal festivities of Bleke's Coffee House. He scowled as he struggled morosely with an obstinate tie. One cannot disguise the fact—Ginger was warming up. And it was just at this moment that Fate, as though it had been waiting for the psychological instant, applied the finishing touch. There was a knock at the door, and a waiter came in with a telegram.

Ginger looked at the envelope. It had been re-addressed and forwarded on from the Hotel Normandie. It was a wireless, handed in on board the White Star liner *Olympic*, and it ran as follows :

Remember. Death to the Family. S.

Ginger sat down heavily on the bed.

The driver of the taxi-cab which at twenty-five minutes past seven drew up at the dingy door of Bleke's Coffee House in the Strand was rather struck by his fare's manner and appearance. A determined-looking sort of young bloke, was the taxi-driver's verdict.