THE DASTARDLY BEHAVIOUR OF BASHMEAD

The cynical and unblushing baseness of Rupert Alexander Bashmead had formed a subject of conversation among his friends and acquaintances from his eighth birthday onwards. At school his masters, drawing gloomy conclusions from the ingenious system of cribs for which the name of Bashmead is still a household word at St Asterisk's, were wont to observe that he would come to a bad end. They gave him to understand that if — by some miscarriage of justice — his sentence were to be commuted to penal servitude for life, they would be wounded and disappointed. At College it was an accepted axiom in his set that if there was only one comfortable chair in a room, Bashmead got it. In fact, he was Bashmead. There is no other word.

Among the friends he made at College — for even a man of his hideous moral blackness makes friends — was one James Prendergast. To sum up James's salient points, he was six-foot-two in height, frivolous in disposition, and boasted a skill amounting to genius in the art of tossing for drinks. He had a theory that a man who wishes to leave the world a better place for his presence in it should choose a walk in life, and not rest until he has made himself pre-eminent in it. James's walk in life was tossing for drinks.

It did not escape the notice of his acquaintances that Rupert Alexander Bashmead was at considerable pains to cultivate James Prendergast. To account for this phenomenon, they were divided into two schools of thought. His enemies said, in their malicious way, that they supposed he must like James. His friends generously ridiculed the idea. It was absurd, they argued, to suppose that he would make a friend of a man unless he hoped to get something out of him. He was trying to borrow money from James — that was it.

But they were wrong, and for this reason — James had no money. If he had any, we have every reason to suppose that Rupert would have endeavoured to borrow it but as he had none another explanation becomes necessary. Nor is it far to seek. James had a sister, Muriel. There was not much of her, but what there was was charming. Brown hair and grey eyes. Some people said she was clever. Her friends said it was a pity, but she was not nearly so clever as she imagined herself to be.

It was shortly after his introduction to her that Rupert discovered, with no small astonishment, that there was someone in the world whom he cared for more than himself. Matters speedily reached such a pitch that, after carefully diagnosing his symptoms, he came to the conclusion that he was madly in love. At the time at which this story opens he had reached the last stage, where the patient habitually steals

small articles, such as gloves and handkerchiefs, from the Object; treasures them simply because she has touched them, and resolves to lead a better life.

It was, therefore, with immense disgust that he found that he had a rival, a person of such innate nobility of character that, though his name was George Jobson, he was not ashamed of it. Also he wore a made-up tie, and was not ashamed of that either. Moral worth could go no further.

Muriel seemed to like his surety. Nay, to judge by appearances, she preferred it to that of Rupert Alexander Bashmead. Jobson's strong suit was literature. Under the pseudonym of "Theodore Dalrymple" he had once had a short poem published in a magazine. It was not so much the fact that he had received two-and-eightpence for this effort that appealed to Muriel. For the sordid gains of the pen she had little sympathy. It was the fame that won her respect. She, too, trod the thorny paths of Literature. One of her stories, "The Love of Gabriel Undershaw" had been refused by some of the best periodicals in London. This did not make her arrogant, but it gave her a certain feeling of superiority over those of more merely mortal clay, and on the strength of it she had called Rupert Alexander Bashmead — much to the delight of Jobson, who had been present at the outrage — vapid and irreflective, and had scouted the notion that he possessed a soul. And what was left of Rupert had retired in bad order to his lonely rooms. While he was sitting there, chewing a pipe and revolving thoughts of breaking into feverish verse on his own account, James appeared.

"You seem mouldy," was James's didactic utterance. "I've got something here that'll cheer you up."

"Bet it won't," said Rupert, with gloom.

"I bet it does. It nearly killed me. I thought I should have broken something internally. It's a story of my sister's. I found it in the drawing-room. Are you ready?"

Rupert had never been privileged to hear anything from Muriel's pen before.

"I didn't know your sister wrote comic things," he said.

"Nor does she mean to," replied James briefly. "Now then."

And, having announced the title, "Stolen Lips," he embarked upon the story.

For the first two paragraphs the gloom of his listener's countenance remained unshaken. At the fourth his features relaxed. At the seventh he gulped. And, by the time the middle of the tale was reached, he was on the floor biting the carpet.

"More, more!" moaned the stricken Rupert as his friend finished. "Read it again."

He read it again.

And this is where the peculiar baseness of Rupert Alexander Bashmead begins to rear its serpent head. I find the ink on my pen growing white with horror as I write of that scoundrel's immoral doings. Briefly, his shameful conduct was this. He egged on his accomplice, the man Prendergast, to read "Stolen Lips" to him until its first freshness, and, so to speak, its suddenness, had worn off, and he could hear it administered to him without any violent upheaval. Then he put into effect the inconceivably scandalous plot which his disgraceful mind had formed. He called upon Miss Muriel Prendergast at a time when he knew that George Jobson would be there, and, by preconcerted arrangement, James, his misguided tool, entered the room.

"Oh, I say," remarked James, extending a bundle of manuscript, "I've found that story you lost, Muriel."

"Oh, I am glad!" said Muriel, clutching the recovered treasure.

"I wish," observed the snake, Bashmead, "that you would read it to us."

"Oh, please do!" cooed the unsuspecting Jobson.

"If you would really like it," said Muriel.

"Oh, we should," murmured Jobson.

"It is called," said Muriel, "'Stolen Lips.'"

James darted from the room, and she began to read.

"If," said the unspeakable Bashmead, severely, three minutes later, "you cannot behave like a gentleman, Mr. Jobson, wouldn't it be as well if you went?"

"Good-bye, Mr. Jobson," said Muriel. Her manner would have been noticeably chilly in a refrigerator. Jobson left.

"A man," said Bashmead, judicially, "who could find anything to laugh at in a beautiful story like 'Stolen Lips' is capable of anything."

"Yes, isn't he?" said Muriel.

"He is outside the pale; unworthy to associate with his fellow-man. A fit companion for the brutes that perish. In fine, a worm!"

"Yes, isn't he?" said Muriel.

It is a painful story. I have only to add that a wedding was arranged and shortly took place between Rupert Alexander Bashmead and Muriel, only daughter of the late Francis Prendergast; that the bride, who was given away by her uncle, Sir Theophilus Prendergast, looked charming in mousseline de soie, with heliotrope aiguillettes; and that the presents were both numerous and costly. As for George Jobson, shortly before the wedding he joined an exploring expedition to darkest Clapham, and, as he never came back, it is only too probable that he fell a victim to the bores and other beasts which infest that desolate region. Somewhere out in that trackless desert, the great Common, from which so few travellers return, lies a rapidly bleaching skeleton. In happier days that skeleton was Jobson.