

CHAPTER V. STRANGE EXPERIENCES OF AN ARTIST'S MODEL

"I say, old thing!"

Archie spoke plaintively. Already he was looking back ruefully to the time when he had supposed that an artist's model had a soft job. In the first five minutes muscles which he had not been aware that he possessed had started to ache like neglected teeth. His respect for the toughness and durability of artists' models was now solid. How they acquired the stamina to go through this sort of thing all day and then bound off to Bohemian revels at night was more than he could understand.

"Don't wobble, confound you!" snorted Mr. Wheeler.

"Yes, but, my dear old artist," said Archie, "what you don't seem to grasp--what you appear not to realise--is that I'm getting a crick in the back."

"You weakling! You miserable, invertebrate worm. Move an inch and I'll murder you, and come and dance on your grave every Wednesday and Saturday. I'm just getting it."

"It's in the spine that it seems to catch me principally."

"Be a man, you faint-hearted string-bean!" urged J. B. Wheeler. "You

ought to be ashamed of yourself. Why, a girl who was posing for me last week stood for a solid hour on one leg, holding a tennis racket over her head and smiling brightly withal."

"The female of the species is more india-rubbery than the male," argued Archie.

"Well, I'll be through in a few minutes. Don't weaken. Think how proud you'll be when you see yourself on all the bookstalls."

Archie sighed, and braced himself to the task once more. He wished he had never taken on this binge. In addition to his physical discomfort, he was feeling a most awful chump. The cover on which Mr. Wheeler was engaged was for the August number of the magazine, and it had been necessary for Archie to drape his reluctant form in a two-piece bathing suit of a vivid lemon colour; for he was supposed to be representing one of those jolly dogs belonging to the best families who dive off floats at exclusive seashore resorts. J. B. Wheeler, a stickler for accuracy, had wanted him to remove his socks and shoes; but there Archie had stood firm. He was willing to make an ass of himself, but not a silly ass.

"All right," said J. B. Wheeler, laying down his brush. "That will do for to-day. Though, speaking without prejudice and with no wish to be offensive, if I had had a model who wasn't a weak-kneed, jelly-backed son of Belial, I could have got the darned thing finished without having to have another sitting."

"I wonder why you chappies call this sort of thing 'sitting,'" said Archie, pensively, as he conducted tentative experiments in osteopathy on his aching back. "I say, old thing, I could do with a restorative, if you have one handy. But, of course, you haven't, I suppose," he added, resignedly. Abstemious as a rule, there were moments when Archie found the Eighteenth Amendment somewhat trying.

J. B. Wheeler shook his head.

"You're a little previous," he said. "But come round in another day or so, and I may be able to do something for you." He moved with a certain conspirator-like caution to a corner of the room, and, lifting to one side a pile of canvases, revealed a stout barrel, which, he regarded with a fatherly and benignant eye. "I don't mind telling you that, in the fullness of time, I believe this is going to spread a good deal of sweetness and light."

"Oh, ah," said Archie, interested. "Home-brew, what?"

"Made with these hands. I added a few more raisins yesterday, to speed things up a bit. There is much virtue in your raisin. And, talking of speeding things up, for goodness' sake try to be a bit more punctual to-morrow. We lost an hour of good daylight to-day."

"I like that! I was here on the absolute minute. I had to hang about on

the landing waiting for you."

"Well, well, that doesn't matter," said J. B. Wheeler, impatiently, for the artist soul is always annoyed by petty details. "The point is that we were an hour late in getting to work. Mind you're here to-morrow at eleven sharp."

It was, therefore, with a feeling of guilt and trepidation that Archie mounted the stairs on the following morning; for in spite of his good resolutions he was half an hour behind time. He was relieved to find that his friend had also lagged by the wayside. The door of the studio was ajar, and he went in, to discover the place occupied by a lady of mature years, who was scrubbing the floor with a mop. He went into the bedroom and donned his bathing suit. When he emerged, ten minutes later, the charwoman had gone, but J. B. Wheeler was still absent. Rather glad of the respite, he sat down to kill time by reading the morning paper, whose sporting page alone he had managed to master at the breakfast table.

There was not a great deal in the paper to interest him. The usual bond-robbery had taken place on the previous day, and the police were reported hot on the trail of the Master-Mind who was alleged to be at the back of these financial operations. A messenger named Henry Babcock had been arrested and was expected to become confidential. To one who, like Archie, had never owned a bond, the story made little appeal. He turned with more interest to a cheery half-column on the activities of a

gentleman in Minnesota who, with what seemed to Archie, as he thought of Mr. Daniel Brewster, a good deal of resource and public spirit, had recently beamed his father-in-law with the family meat-axe. It was only after he had read this through twice in a spirit of gentle approval that it occurred to him that J. B. Wheeler was uncommonly late at the tryst. He looked at his watch, and found that he had been in the studio three-quarters of an hour.

Archie became restless. Long-suffering old bean though he was, he considered this a bit thick. He got up and went out on to the landing, to see if there were any signs of the blighter. There were none. He began to understand now what had happened. For some reason or other the bally artist was not coming to the studio at all that day. Probably he had called up the hotel and left a message to this effect, and Archie had just missed it. Another man might have waited to make certain that his message had reached its destination, but not woollen-headed Wheeler, the most casual individual in New York.

Thoroughly aggrieved, Archie turned back to the studio to dress and go away.

His progress was stayed by a solid, forbidding slab of oak. Somehow or other, since he had left the room, the door had managed to get itself shut.

"Oh, dash it!" said Archie.

The mildness of the expletive was proof that the full horror of the situation had not immediately come home to him. His mind in the first few moments was occupied with the problem of how the door had got that way. He could not remember shutting it. Probably he had done it unconsciously. As a child, he had been taught by sedulous elders that the little gentleman always closed doors behind him, and presumably his subconscious self was still under the influence. And then, suddenly, he realised that this infernal, officious ass of a subconscious self had deposited him right in the gumbo. Behind that closed door, unattainable as youthful ambition, lay his gent's heather-mixture with the green twill, and here he was, out in the world, alone, in a lemon-coloured bathing suit.

In all crises of human affairs there are two broad courses open to a man. He can stay where he is or he can go elsewhere. Archie, leaning on the banisters, examined these alternatives narrowly. If he stayed where he was he would have to spend the night on this dashed landing. If he legged it, in this kit, he would be gathered up by the constabulary before he had gone a hundred yards. He was no pessimist, but he was reluctantly forced to the conclusion that he was up against it.

It was while he was musing with a certain tenseness on these things that the sound of footsteps came to him from below. But almost in the first instant the hope that this might be J. B. Wheeler, the curse of the human race, died away. Whoever was coming up the stairs was running, and

J. B. Wheeler never ran upstairs. He was not one of your lean, haggard, spiritual-looking geniuses. He made a large income with his brush and pencil, and spent most of it in creature comforts. This couldn't be J. B. Wheeler.

It was not. It was a tall, thin man whom he had never seen before. He appeared to be in a considerable hurry. He let himself into the studio on the floor below, and vanished without even waiting to shut the door.

He had come and disappeared in almost record time, but, brief though his passing had been, it had been long enough to bring consolation to Archie. A sudden bright light had been vouchsafed to Archie, and he now saw an admirably ripe and fruity scheme for ending his troubles. What could be simpler than to toddle down one flight of stairs and in an easy and debonair manner ask the chappie's permission to use his telephone? And what could be simpler, once he was at the 'phone, than to get in touch with somebody at the Cosmopolis who would send down a few trousers and what not in a kit bag. It was a priceless solution, thought Archie, as he made his way downstairs. Not even embarrassing, he meant to say. This chappie, living in a place like this, wouldn't bat an eyelid at the spectacle of a fellow trickling about the place in a bathing suit. They would have a good laugh about the whole thing.

"I say, I hate to bother you--dare say you're busy and all that sort of thing--but would you mind if I popped in for half a second and used your 'phone?"

That was the speech, the extremely gentlemanly and well-phrased speech. Which Archie had prepared to deliver the moment the man appeared. The reason he did not deliver it was that the man did not appear. He knocked, but nothing stirred.

"I say!"

Archie now perceived that the door was ajar, and that on an envelope attached with a tack to one of the panels was the name "Elmer M. Moon" He pushed the door a little farther open and tried again.

"Oh, Mr. Moon! Mr. Moon!" He waited a moment. "Oh, Mr. Moon! Mr. Moon! Are you there, Mr. Moon?"

He blushed hotly. To his sensitive ear the words had sounded exactly like the opening line of the refrain of a vaudeville song-hit. He decided to waste no further speech on a man with such an unfortunate surname until he could see him face to face and get a chance of lowering his voice a bit. Absolutely absurd to stand outside a chappie's door singing song-hits in a lemon-coloured bathing suit. He pushed the door open and walked in; and his subconscious self, always the gentleman, closed it gently behind him.

"Up!" said a low, sinister, harsh, unfriendly, and unpleasant voice.

"Eh?" said Archie, revolving sharply on his axis.

He found himself confronting the hurried gentleman who had run upstairs. This sprinter had produced an automatic pistol, and was pointing it in a truculent manner at his head. Archie stared at his host, and his host stared at him.

"Put your hands up," he said.

"Oh, right-o! Absolutely!" said Archie. "But I mean to say--"

The other was drinking him in with considerable astonishment. Archie's costume seemed to have made a powerful impression upon him.

"Who the devil are you?" he enquired.

"Me? Oh, my name's--"

"Never mind your name. What are you doing here?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I popped in to ask if I might use your 'phone. You see--"

A certain relief seemed to temper the austerity of the other's gaze. As a visitor, Archie, though surprising, seemed to be better than he had expected.

"I don't know what to do with you," he said, meditatively.

"If you'd just let me toddle to the 'phone--"

"Likely!" said the man. He appeared to reach a decision. "Here, go into that room."

He indicated with a jerk of his head the open door of what was apparently a bedroom at the farther end of the studio.

"I take it," said Archie, chattily, "that all this may seem to you not a little rummy."

"Get on!"

"I was only saying--"

"Well, I haven't time to listen. Get a move on!"

The bedroom was in a state of untidiness which eclipsed anything which Archie had ever witnessed. The other appeared to be moving house. Bed, furniture, and floor were covered with articles of clothing. A silk shirt wreathed itself about Archie's ankles as he stood gaping, and, as he moved farther into the room, his path was paved with ties and collars.

"Sit down!" said Elmer M. Moon, abruptly.

"Right-o! Thanks," said Archie, "I suppose you wouldn't like me to explain, and what not, what?"

"No!" said Mr. Moon. "I haven't got your spare time. Put your hands behind that chair."

Archie did so, and found them immediately secured by what felt like a silk tie. His assiduous host then proceeded to fasten his ankles in a like manner. This done, he seemed to feel that he had done all that was required of him, and he returned to the packing of a large suitcase which stood by the window.

"I say!" said Archie.

Mr. Moon, with the air of a man who has remembered something which he had overlooked, shoved a sock in his guest's mouth and resumed his packing. He was what might be called an impressionist packer. His aim appeared to be speed rather than neatness. He bundled his belongings in, closed the bag with some difficulty, and, stepping to the window, opened it. Then he climbed out on to the fire-escape, dragged the suit-case after him, and was gone.

Archie, left alone, addressed himself to the task of freeing his

prisoned limbs. The job proved much easier than he had expected. Mr. Moon, that hustler, had wrought for the moment, not for all time. A practical man, he had been content to keep his visitor shackled merely for such a period as would permit him to make his escape unhindered. In less than ten minutes Archie, after a good deal of snake-like writhing, was pleased to discover that the thingummy attached to his wrists had loosened sufficiently to enable him to use his hands. He untied himself and got up.

He now began to tell himself that out of evil cometh good. His encounter with the elusive Mr. Moon had not been an agreeable one, but it had had this solid advantage, that it had left him right in the middle of a great many clothes. And Mr. Moon, whatever his moral defects, had the one excellent quality of taking about the same size as himself. Archie, casting a covetous eye upon a tweed suit which lay on the bed, was on the point of climbing into the trousers when on the outer door of the studio there sounded a forceful knocking.

"Open up here!"