

CHAPTER VII. MR. ROSCOE SHERRIFF HAS AN IDEA

Archie inserted a fresh cigarette in his long holder and began to smoke a little moodily. It was about a week after his disturbing adventures in J. B. Wheeler's studio, and life had ceased for the moment to be a thing of careless enjoyment. Mr. Wheeler, mourning over his lost home-brew and refusing, like Niobe, to be comforted, has suspended the sittings for the magazine cover, thus robbing Archie of his life-work. Mr. Brewster had not been in genial mood of late. And, in addition to all this, Lucille was away on a visit to a school-friend. And when Lucille went away, she took with her the sunshine. Archie was not surprised at her being popular and in demand among her friends, but that did not help him to become reconciled to her absence.

He gazed rather wistfully across the table at his friend, Roscoe Sherriff, the Press-agent, another of his Pen-and-Ink Club acquaintances. They had just finished lunch, and during the meal Sherriff, who, like most men of action, was fond of hearing the sound of his own voice and liked exercising it on the subject of himself, had been telling Archie a few anecdotes about his professional past. From these the latter had conceived a picture of Roscoe Sherriff's life as a prismatic thing of energy and adventure and well-paid withal--just the sort of life, in fact, which he would have enjoyed leading himself. He wished that he, too, like the Press-agent, could go about the place "slipping things over" and "putting things across." Daniel Brewster, he

felt, would have beamed upon a son-in-law like Roscoe Sherriff.

"The more I see of America," sighed Archie, "the more it amazes me. All you birds seem to have been doing things from the cradle upwards. I wish I could do things!"

"Well, why don't you?"

Archie flicked the ash from his cigarette into the finger-bowl.

"Oh, I don't know, you know," he said, "Somehow, none of our family ever have. I don't know why it is, but whenever a Moffam starts out to do things he infallibly makes a bloomer. There was a Moffam in the Middle Ages who had a sudden spasm of energy and set out to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, dressed as a wandering friar. Rum ideas they had in those days."

"Did he get there?"

"Absolutely not! Just as he was leaving the front door his favourite hound mistook him for a tramp--or a varlet, or a scurvy knave, or whatever they used to call them at that time--and bit him in the fleshy part of the leg."

"Well, at least he started."

"Enough to make a chappie start, what?"

Roscoe Sherriff sipped his coffee thoughtfully. He was an apostle of Energy, and it seemed to him that he could make a convert of Archie and incidentally do himself a bit of good. For several days he had been, looking for someone like Archie to help him in a small matter which he had in mind.

"If you're really keen on doing things," he said, "there's something you can do for me right away."

Archie beamed. Action was what his soul demanded.

"Anything, dear boy, anything! State your case!"

"Would you have any objection to putting up a snake for me?"

"Putting up a snake?"

"Just for a day or two."

"But how do you mean, old soul? Put him up where?"

"Wherever you live. Where do you live? The Cosmopolis, isn't it? Of course! You married old Brewster's daughter. I remember reading about it."

"But, I say, laddie, I don't want to spoil your day and disappoint you and so forth, but my jolly old father-in-law would never let me keep a snake. Why, it's as much as I can do to make him let me stop on in the place."

"He wouldn't know."

"There's not much that goes on in the hotel that he doesn't know," said Archie, doubtfully.

"He mustn't know. The whole point of the thing is that it must be a dead secret."

Archie flicked some more ash into the finger-bowl.

"I don't seem absolutely to have grasped the affair in all its aspects, if you know what I mean," he said. "I mean to say--in the first place--why would it brighten your young existence if I entertained this snake of yours?"

"It's not mine. It belongs to Mme. Brudowska. You've heard of her, of course?"

"Oh yes. She's some sort of performing snake female in vaudeville or something, isn't she, or something of that species or order?"

"You're near it, but not quite right. She is the leading exponent of high-brow tragedy on any stage in the civilized world."

"Absolutely! I remember now. My wife lugged me to see her perform one night. It all comes back to me. She had me wedged in an orchestra-stall before I knew what I was up against, and then it was too late. I remember reading in some journal or other that she had a pet snake, given her by some Russian prince or other, what?"

"That," said Sherriff, "was the impression I intended to convey when I sent the story to the papers. I'm her Press-agent. As a matter of fact, I bought Peter-its name's Peter-myself down on the East Side. I always believe in animals for Press-agent stunts. I've nearly always had good results. But with Her Nibs I'm handicapped. Shackled, so to speak. You might almost say my genius is stifled. Or strangled, if you prefer it."

"Anything you say," agreed Archie, courteously, "But how? Why is your what-d'you-call-it what's-its-named?"

"She keeps me on a leash. She won't let me do anything with a kick in it. If I've suggested one rip-snorting stunt, I've suggested twenty, and every time she turns them down on the ground that that sort of thing is beneath the dignity of an artist in her position. It doesn't give a fellow a chance. So now I've made up my mind to do her good by stealth. I'm going to steal her snake."

"Steal it? Pinch it, as it were?"

"Yes. Big story for the papers, you see. She's grown very much attached to Peter. He's her mascot. I believe she's practically kidded herself into believing that Russian prince story. If I can sneak it away and keep it away for a day or two, she'll do the rest. She'll make such a fuss that the papers will be full of it."

"I see."

"Wow, any ordinary woman would work in with me. But not Her Nibs. She would call it cheap and degrading and a lot of other things. It's got to be a genuine steal, and, if I'm caught at it, I lose my job. So that's where you come in."

"But where am I to keep the jolly old reptile?"

"Oh, anywhere. Punch a few holes in a hat-box, and make it up a shakedown inside. It'll be company for you."

"Something in that. My wife's away just now and it's a bit lonely in the evenings."

"You'll never be lonely with Peter around. He's a great scout. Always merry and bright."

"He doesn't bite, I suppose, or sting or what-not?"

"He may what-not occasionally. It depends on the weather. But, outside of that, he's as harmless as a canary."

"Dashed dangerous things, canaries," said Archie, thoughtfully. "They peck at you."

"Don't weaken!" pleaded the Press-agent

"Oh, all right. I'll take him. By the way, touching the matter of browsing and sluicing. What do I feed him on?"

"Oh, anything. Bread-and-milk or fruit or soft-boiled egg or dog-biscuit or ants'-eggs. You know--anything you have yourself. Well, I'm much obliged for your hospitality. I'll do the same for you another time. Now I must be getting along to see to the practical end of the thing. By the way, Her Nibs lives at the Cosmopolis, too. Very convenient. Well, so long. See you later."

Archie, left alone, began for the first time to have serious doubts. He had allowed himself to be swayed by Mr. Sherriff's magnetic personality, but now that the other had removed himself he began to wonder if he had been entirely wise to lend his sympathy and co-operation to the scheme. He had never had intimate dealings with a snake before, but he had kept

silkworms as a child, and there had been the deuce of a lot of fuss and unpleasantness over them. Getting into the salad and what-not. Something seemed to tell him that he was asking for trouble with a loud voice, but he had given his word and he supposed he would have to go through with it.

He lit another cigarette and wandered out into Fifth Avenue. His usually smooth brow was ruffled with care. Despite the eulogies which Sherriff had uttered concerning Peter, he found his doubts increasing. Peter might, as the Press-agent had stated, be a great scout, but was his little Garden of Eden on the fifth floor of the Cosmopolis Hotel likely to be improved by the advent of even the most amiable and winsome of serpents? However--

"Moffam! My dear fellow!"

The voice, speaking suddenly in his ear from behind, roused Archie from his reflections. Indeed, it roused him so effectually that he jumped a clear inch off the ground and bit his tongue. Revolving on his axis, he found himself confronting a middle-aged man with a face like a horse. The man was dressed in something of an old-world style. His clothes had an English cut. He had a drooping grey moustache. He also wore a grey bowler hat flattened at the crown--but who are we to judge him?

"Archie Moffam! I have been trying to find you all the morning."

Archie had placed him now. He had not seen General Mannister for several years--not, indeed, since the days when he used to meet him at the home of young Lord Seacliff, his nephew. Archie had been at Eton and Oxford with Seacliff, and had often visited him in the Long Vacation.

"Halloa, General! What ho, what ho! What on earth are you doing over here?"

"Let's get out of this crush, my boy." General Mannister steered Archie into a side-street, "That's better." He cleared his throat once or twice, as if embarrassed. "I've brought Seacliff over," he said, finally.

"Dear old Squiffy here? Oh, I say! Great work!"

General Mannister did not seem to share his enthusiasm. He looked like a horse with a secret sorrow. He coughed three times, like a horse who, in addition to a secret sorrow, had contracted asthma.

"You will find Seacliff changed," he said. "Let me see, how long is it since you and he met?"

Archie reflected.

"I was demobbed just about a year ago. I saw him in Paris about a year before that. The old egg got a bit of shrapnel in his foot or something,

didn't he? Anyhow, I remember he was sent home."

"His foot is perfectly well again now. But, unfortunately, the enforced inaction led to disastrous results. You recollect, no doubt, that Seacliff always had a--a tendency;--a--a weakness--it was a family failing--"

"Mopping it up, do you mean? Shifting it? Looking on the jolly old stuff when it was red and what not, what?"

"Exactly."

Archie nodded.

"Dear old Squiffy was always rather-a lad for the wassail-bowl. When I met him in Paris, I remember, he was quite tolerably blotto."

"Precisely. And the failing has, I regret to say, grown on him since he returned from the war. My poor sister was extremely worried. In fact, to cut a long story short, I induced him to accompany me to America. I am attached to the British Legation in Washington now, you know."

"Oh, really?"

"I wished Seacliff to come with me to Washington, but he insists on remaining in New York. He stated specifically that the thought of living

in Washington gave him the--what was the expression he used?"

"The pip?"

"The pip. Precisely."

"But what was the idea of bringing him to America?"

"This admirable Prohibition enactment has rendered America--to my mind--the ideal place for a young man of his views." The General looked at his watch. "It is most fortunate that I happened to run into you, my dear fellow. My train for Washington leaves in another hour, and I have packing to do. I want to leave poor Seacliff in your charge while I am gone."

"Oh, I say! What!"

"You can look after him. I am credibly informed that even now there are places in New York where a determined young man may obtain the--er--stuff, and I should be infinitely obliged--and my poor sister would be infinitely grateful--if you would keep an eye on him." He hailed a taxi-cab. "I am sending Seacliff round to the Cosmopolis to-night. I am sure you, will do everything you can. Good-bye, my boy, good-bye."

Archie continued his walk. This, he felt, was beginning to be a bit

thick. He smiled a bitter, mirthless smile as he recalled the fact that less than half an hour had elapsed since he had expressed a regret that he did not belong to the ranks of those who do things. Fate since then had certainly supplied him with jobs with a lavish hand. By bed-time he would be an active accomplice to a theft, valet and companion to a snake he had never met, and--as far as could gather the scope of his duties--a combination of nursemaid and private detective to dear old Squiffy.

It was past four o'clock when he returned to the Cosmopolis. Roscoe Sherriff was pacing the lobby of the hotel nervously, carrying a small hand-bag.

"Here you are at last! Good heavens, man, I've been waiting two hours."

"Sorry, old bean. I was musing a bit and lost track of the time."

The Press-agent looked cautiously round. There was nobody within earshot.

"Here he is!" he said.

"Who?"

"Peter."

"Where?" said Archie, staring blankly.

"In this bag. Did you expect to find him strolling arm-in-arm with me round the lobby? Here you are! Take him!"

He was gone. And Archie, holding the bag, made his way to the lift. The bag squirmed gently in his grip.

The only other occupant of the lift was a striking-looking woman of foreign appearance, dressed in a way that made Archie feel that she must be somebody or she couldn't look like that. Her face, too, seemed vaguely familiar. She entered the lift at the second floor where the tea-room is, and she had the contented expression of one who had tea'd to her satisfaction. She got off at the same floor as Archie, and walked swiftly, in a lithe, pantherist way, round the bend in the corridor.

Archie followed more slowly. When he reached the door of his room, the passage was empty. He inserted the key in his door, turned it, pushed the door open, and pocketed the key. He was about to enter when the bag again squirmed gently in his grip.

From the days of Pandora, through the epoch of Bluebeard's wife, down to the present time, one of the chief failings of humanity has been the disposition to open things that were better closed. It would have been simple for Archie to have taken another step and put a door between himself and the world, but there came to him the irresistible desire to peep into the bag now--not three seconds later, but now. All the way up in the lift he had been battling with the temptation, and now he

succumbed.

The bag was one of those simple bags with a thingummy which you press. Archie pressed it. And, as it opened, out popped the head of Peter. His eyes met Archie's. Over his head there seemed to be an invisible mark of interrogation. His gaze was curious, but kindly. He appeared to be saying to himself, "Have I found a friend?"

Serpents, or Snakes, says the Encyclopaedia, are reptiles of the saurian class Ophidia, characterised by an elongated, cylindrical, limbless, scaly form, and distinguished from lizards by the fact that the halves (RAMI) of the lower jaw are not solidly united at the chin, but movably connected by an elastic ligament. The vertebra are very numerous, gastrocentrous, and procoelous. And, of course, when they put it like that, you can see at once that a man might spend hours with combined entertainment and profit just looking at a snake.

Archie would no doubt have done this; but long before he had time really to inspect the halves (RAMI) of his new friend's lower jaw and to admire its elastic fittings, and long before the gastrocentrous and procoelous character of the other's vertebrae had made any real impression on him, a piercing scream almost at his elbow--startled him out of his scientific reverie. A door opposite had opened, and the woman of the elevator was standing staring at him with an expression of horror and fury that went through, him like a knife. It was the expression which, more than anything else, had made Mme. Brudowska what she was

professionally. Combined with a deep voice and a sinuous walk, it enabled her to draw down a matter of a thousand dollars per week.

Indeed, though the fact gave him little pleasure, Archie, as a matter of fact, was at this moment getting about--including war-tax--two dollars and seventy-five cents worth of the great emotional star for nothing. For, having treated him gratis to the look of horror and fury, she now moved towards him with the sinuous walk and spoke in the tone which she seldom permitted herself to use before the curtain of act two, unless there was a whale of a situation that called for it in act one.

"Thief!"

It was the way she said it.

Archie staggered backwards as though he had been hit between the eyes, fell through the open door of his room, kicked it to with a flying foot, and collapsed on the bed. Peter, the snake, who had fallen on the floor with a squashy sound, looked surprised and pained for a moment; then, being a philosopher at heart, cheered up and began hunting for flies under the bureau.