

## CHAPTER IX. A LETTER FROM PARKER

As the days went by and he settled down at the Hotel Cosmopolis, Archie, looking about him and revising earlier judgments, was inclined to think that of all his immediate circle he most admired Parker, the lean, grave valet of Mr. Daniel Brewster. Here was a man who, living in the closest contact with one of the most difficult persons in New York, contrived all the while to maintain an unbowed head, and, as far as one could gather from appearances, a tolerably cheerful disposition. A great man, judge him by what standard you pleased. Anxious as he was to earn an honest living, Archie would not have changed places with Parker for the salary of a movie-star.

It was Parker who first directed Archie's attention to the hidden merits of Pongo. Archie had drifted into his father-in-law's suite one morning, as he sometimes did in the effort to establish more amicable relations, and had found it occupied only by the valet, who was dusting the furniture and bric-a-brac with a feather broom rather in the style of a man-servant at the rise of the curtain of an old-fashioned farce. After a courteous exchange of greetings, Archie sat down and lit a cigarette. Parker went on dusting.

"The gov'nor," said Parker, breaking the silence, "has some nice little objay dar, sir."

"Little what?"

"Objay dar, sir."

Light dawned upon Archie.

"Of course, yes. French for junk. I see what you mean now. Dare say you're right, old friend. Don't know much about these things myself."

Parker gave an appreciative flick at a vase on the mantelpiece.

"Very valuable, some of the gov'nor's things." He had picked up the small china figure of the warrior with the spear, and was grooming it with the ostentatious care of one brushing flies off a sleeping Venus. He regarded this figure with a look of affectionate esteem which seemed to Archie absolutely uncalled-for. Archie's taste in Art was not precious. To his untutored eye the thing was only one degree less foul than his father-in-law's Japanese prints, which he had always observed with silent loathing. "This one, now," continued Parker. "Worth a lot of money. Oh, a lot of money."

"What, Pongo?" said Archie incredulously.

"Sir?"

"I always call that rummy-looking what-not Pongo. Don't know what else

you could call him, what!"

The valet seemed to disapprove of this levity. He shook his head and replaced the figure on the mantelpiece.

"Worth a lot of money," he repeated. "Not by itself, no."

"Oh, not by itself?"

"No, sir. Things like this come in pairs. Somewhere or other there's the companion-piece to this here, and if the gov'nor could get hold of it, he'd have something worth having. Something that connoozers would give a lot of money for. But one's no good without the other. You have to have both, if you understand my meaning, sir."

"I see. Like filling a straight flush, what?"

"Precisely, sir."

Archie gazed at Pongo again, with the dim hope of discovering virtues not immediately apparent to the casual observer. But without success. Pongo left him cold--even chilly. He would not have taken Pongo as a gift, to oblige a dying friend.

"How much would the pair be worth?" he asked. "Ten dollars?"

Parker smiled a gravely superior smile. "A leetle more than that, sir. Several thousand dollars, more like it."

"Do you mean to say," said Archie, with honest amazement, "that there are chumps going about loose--absolutely loose--who would pay that for a weird little object like Pongo?"

"Undoubtedly, sir. These antique china figures are in great demand among collectors."

Archie looked at Pongo once more, and shook his head.

"Well, well, well! It takes all sorts to make a world, what!"

What might be called the revival of Pongo, the restoration of Pongo to the ranks of the things that matter, took place several weeks later, when Archie was making holiday at the house which his father-in-law had taken for the summer at Brookport. The curtain of the second act may be said to rise on Archie strolling back from the golf-links in the cool of an August evening. From time to time he sang slightly, and wondered idly if Lucille would put the finishing touch upon the all-rightness of everything by coming to meet him and sharing his homeward walk.

She came in view at this moment, a trim little figure in a white skirt and a pale blue sweater. She waved to Archie; and Archie, as always at the sight of her, was conscious of that jumpy, fluttering sensation

about the heart, which, translated into words, would have formed the question, "What on earth could have made a girl like that fall in love with a chump like me?" It was a question which he was continually asking himself, and one which was perpetually in the mind also of Mr. Brewster, his father-in-law. The matter of Archie's unworthiness to be the husband of Lucille was practically the only one on which the two men saw eye to eye.

"Hallo--allo--allo!" said Archie. "Here we are, what! I was just hoping you would drift over the horizon."

Lucille kissed him.

"You're a darling," she said. "And you look like a Greek god in that suit."

"Glad you like it." Archie squinted with some complacency down his chest. "I always say it doesn't matter what you pay for a suit, so long as it's right. I hope your jolly old father will feel that way when he settles up for it."

"Where is father? Why didn't he come back with you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, he didn't seem any too keen on my company. I left him in the locker-room chewing a cigar. Gave me the impression of having something on his mind."

"Oh, Archie! You didn't beat him AGAIN?"

Archie looked uncomfortable. He gazed out to sea with something of embarrassment.

"Well, as a matter of fact, old thing, to be absolutely frank, I, as it were, did!"

"Not badly?"

"Well, yes! I rather fancy I put it across him with some vim and not a little emphasis. To be perfectly accurate, I licked him by ten and eight."

"But you promised me you would let him beat you to-day. You know how pleased it would have made him."

"I know. But, light of my soul, have you any idea how dashed difficult it is to get beaten by your festive parent at golf?"

"Oh, well!" Lucille sighed. "It can't be helped, I suppose." She felt in the pocket of her sweater. "Oh, there's a letter for you. I've just been to fetch the mail. I don't know who it can be from. The handwriting looks like a vampire's. Kind of scrawly."

Archie inspected the envelope. It provided no solution.

"That's rummy! Who could be writing to me?"

"Open it and see."

"Dashed bright scheme! I will, Herbert Parker. Who the deuce is Herbert Parker?"

"Parker? Father's valet's name was Parker. The one he dismissed when he found he was wearing his shirts."

"Do you mean to say any reasonable chappie would willingly wear the sort of shirts your father--? I mean to say, there must have been some mistake."

"Do read the letter. I expect he wants to use your influence with father to have him taken back."

"MY influence? With your FATHER? Well, I'm dashed. Sanguine sort of Johnny, if he does. Well, here's what he says. Of course, I remember jolly old Parker now--great pal of mine."

Dear Sir,--It is some time since the undersigned had the honour of conversing with you, but I am respectfully trusting that you may recall me to mind when I mention that until

recently I served Mr. Brewster, your father-in-law, in the capacity of valet. Owing to an unfortunate misunderstanding, I was dismissed from that position and am now temporarily out of a job. "How art thou fallen from Heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!" (Isaiah xiv. 12.)

"You know," said Archie, admiringly, "this bird is hot stuff! I mean to say he writes dashed well."

It is not, however, with my own affairs that I desire to trouble you, dear sir. I have little doubt that all will be well with me and that I shall not fall like a sparrow to the ground. "I have been young and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Psalms xxxvii. 25). My object in writing to you is as follows. You may recall that I had the pleasure of meeting you one morning in Mr. Brewster's suite, when we had an interesting talk on the subject of Mr. B.'s objets d'art. You may recall being particularly interested in a small china figure. To assist your memory, the figure to which I allude is the one which you whimsically referred to as Pongo. I informed you, if you remember, that, could the accompanying figure be secured, the pair would be extremely valuable.

I am glad to say, dear sir? that this has now transpired, and is on view at Beale's Art Galleries on West Forty-Fifty Street,



where it will be sold to-morrow at auction, the sale commencing at two-thirty sharp. If Mr. Brewster cares to attend, he will, I fancy, have little trouble in securing it at a reasonable price. I confess that I had thought of refraining from apprising my late employer of this matter, but more Christian feelings have prevailed. "If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head" (Romans xii. 20). Nor, I must confess, am I altogether uninfluenced by the thought that my action in this matter may conceivably lead to Mr. B. consenting to forget the past and to reinstate me in my former position. However, I am confident that I can leave this to his good feeling.

I remain, respectfully yours,  
Herbert Parker.

Lucille clapped her hands.

"How splendid! Father will be pleased!"

"Yes. Friend Parker has certainly found a way to make the old dad fond of him. Wish I could!"

"But you can, silly! He'll be delighted when you show him that letter."

"Yes, with Parker. Old Herb. Parker's is the neck he'll fall on--not

mine."

Lucille reflected.

"I wish--" she began. She stopped. Her eyes lit up. "Oh, Archie, darling, I've got an idea!"

"Decant it."

"Why don't you slip up to New York to-morrow and buy the thing, and give it to father as a surprise?"

Archie patted her hand kindly. He hated to spoil her girlish day-dreams.

"Yes," he said. "But reflect, queen of my heart! I have at the moment of going to press just two dollars fifty in specie, which I took off your father this after-noon. We were playing twenty-five cents a Hole. He coughed it up without enthusiasm--in fact, with a nasty hacking sound--but I've got it. But that's all I have got."

"That's all right. You can pawn that ring and that bracelet of mine."

"Oh, I say, what! Pop the family jewels?"

"Only for a day or two. Of course, once you've got the thing, father will pay us back. He would give you all the money we asked him for, if

he knew what it was for. But I want to surprise him. And if you were to go to him and ask him for a thousand dollars without telling him what it was for, he might refuse."

"He might!" said Archie. "He might!"

"It all works out splendidly. To-morrow's the Invitation Handicap, and father's been looking forward to it for weeks. He'd hate to have to go up to town himself and not play in it. But you can slip up and slip back without his knowing anything about it."

Archie pondered.

"It sounds a ripe scheme. Yes, it has all the ear-marks of a somewhat fruity wheeze! By Jove, it IS a fruity wheeze! It's an egg!"

"An egg?"

"Good egg, you know. Halloa, here's a postscript. I didn't see it."

P.S.--I should be glad if you would convey my most cordial respects to Mrs. Moffam. Will you also inform her that I chanced to meet Mr. William this morning on Broadway, just off the boat. He desired me to send his regards and to say that he would be joining you at Brookport in the course of a day or so. Mr. B. will be

pleased to have him back. "A wise son maketh a glad father" (Proverbs x. 1).

"Who's Mr. William?" asked Archie.

"My brother Bill, of course. I've told you all about him."

"Oh yes, of course. Your brother Bill. Rummy to think I've got a brother-in-law I've never seen."

"You see, we married so suddenly. When we married, Bill was in Yale."

"Good God! What for?"

"Not jail, silly. Yale. The university."

"Oh, ah, yes."

"Then he went over to Europe for a trip to broaden his mind. You must look him up to-morrow when you get back to New York. He's sure to be at his club."

"I'll make a point of it. Well, vote of thanks to good old Parker! This really does begin to look like the point in my career where I start to have your forbidding old parent eating out of my hand."

"Yes, it's an egg, isn't it!"

"Queen of my soul," said Archie enthusiastically, "it's an omelette!"

The business negotiations in connection with the bracelet and the ring occupied Archie on his arrival in New York to an extent which made it impossible for him to call on Brother Bill before lunch. He decided to postpone the affecting meeting of brothers-in-law to a more convenient season, and made his way to his favourite table at the Cosmopolis grill-room for a bite of lunch preliminary to the fatigues of the sale. He found Salvatore hovering about as usual, and instructed him to come to the rescue with a minute steak.

Salvatore was the dark, sinister-looking waiter who attended, among other tables, to the one at the far end of the grill-room at which Archie usually sat. For several weeks Archie's conversations with the other had dealt exclusively with the bill of fare and its contents; but gradually he had found himself becoming more personal. Even before the war and its democratising influences, Archie had always lacked that reserve which characterises many Britons; and since the war he had looked on nearly everyone he met as a brother. Long since, through the medium of a series of friendly chats, he had heard all about Salvatore's home in Italy, the little newspaper and tobacco shop which his mother owned down on Seventh Avenue, and a hundred other personal details. Archie had an insatiable curiosity about his fellow-man.

"Well done," said Archie.

"Sare?"

"The steak. Not too rare, you know."

"Very good, sare."

Archie looked at the waiter closely. His tone had been subdued and sad. Of course, you don't expect a waiter to beam all over his face and give three rousing cheers simply because you have asked him to bring you a minute steak, but still there was something about Salvatore's manner that disturbed Archie. The man appeared to have the pip. Whether he was merely homesick and brooding on the lost delights of his sunny native land, or whether his trouble was more definite, could only be ascertained by enquiry. So Archie enquired.

"What's the matter, laddie?" he said sympathetically. "Something on your mind?"

"Sare?"

"I say, there seems to be something on your mind. What's the trouble?"

The waiter shrugged his shoulders, as if indicating an unwillingness to inflict his grievances on one of the tipping classes.

"Come on!" persisted Archie encouragingly. "All pals here. Barge alone, old thing, and let's have it."

Salvatore, thus admonished, proceeded in a hurried undertone--with one eye on the headwaiter--to lay bare his soul. What he said was not very coherent, but Archie could make out enough of it to gather that it was a sad story of excessive hours and insufficient pay. He mused awhile. The waiter's hard case touched him.

"I'll tell you what," he said at last. "When jolly old Brewster conies back to town--he's away just now--I'll take you along to him and we'll beard the old boy in his den. I'll introduce you, and you get that extract from Italian opera--off your chest which you've just been singing to me, and you'll find it'll be all right. He isn't what you might call one of my greatest admirers, but everybody says he's a square sort of cove and he'll see you aren't snootered. And now, laddie, touching the matter of that steak."

The waiter disappeared, greatly cheered, and Archie, turning, perceived that his friend Reggie van Tuyl was entering the room. He waved to him to join his table. He liked Reggie, and it also occurred to him that a man of the world like the heir of the van Tuyls, who had been popping about New York for years, might be able to give him some much-needed information on the procedure at an auction sale, a matter on which he himself was profoundly ignorant.