

CHAPTER X. DOING FATHER A BIT OF GOOD

Reggie Van Tuyl approached the table languidly, and sank down into a chair. He was a long youth with a rather subdued and deflated look, as though the burden of the van Tuyl millions was more than his frail strength could support. Most things tired him.

"I say, Reggie, old top," said Archie, "you're just the lad I wanted to see. I require the assistance of a blighter of ripe intellect. Tell me, laddie, do you know anything about sales?"

Reggie eyed him sleepily.

"Sales?"

"Auction sales."

Reggie considered.

"Well, they're sales, you know." He checked a yawn. "Auction sales, you understand."

"Yes," said Archie encouragingly. "Something--the name or something--seemed to tell me that."

"Fellows put things up for sale you know, and other fellows--other fellows go in and--and buy 'em, if you follow me."

"Yes, but what's the procedure? I mean, what do I do? That's what I'm after. I've got to buy something at Beale's this afternoon. How do I set about it?"

"Well," said Reggie, drowsily, "there are several ways of bidding, you know. You can shout, or you can nod, or you can twiddle your fingers--" The effort of concentration was too much for him. He leaned back limply in his chair. "I'll tell you what. I've nothing to do this afternoon. I'll come with you and show you."

When he entered the Art Galleries a few minutes later, Archie was glad of the moral support of even such a wobbly reed as Reggie van Tuyl. There is something about an auction room which weighs heavily upon the novice. The hushed interior was bathed in a dim, religious light; and the congregation, seated on small wooden chairs, gazed in reverent silence at the pulpit, where a gentleman of commanding presence and sparkling pince-nez was delivering a species of chant. Behind a gold curtain at the end of the room mysterious forms flitted to and fro. Archie, who had been expecting something on the lines of the New York Stock Exchange, which he had once been privileged to visit when it was in a more than usually feverish mood, found the atmosphere oppressively ecclesiastical. He sat down and looked about him. The presiding priest went on with his chant.

"Sixteen-sixteen-sixteen-sixteen-sixteen--worth three hundred--sixteen-sixteen-sixteen-sixteen-sixteen--ought to bring five hundred--sixteen-sixteen-seventeen-seventeen-eighteen-eighteen nineteen-nineteen-nineteen."

He stopped and eyed the worshippers with a glittering and reproachful eye. They had, it seemed, disappointed him. His lips curled, and he waved a hand towards a grimly uncomfortable-looking chair with insecure legs and a good deal of gold paint about it. "Gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! You are not here to waste my time; I am not here to waste yours. Am I seriously offered nineteen dollars for this eighteenth-century chair, acknowledged to be the finest piece sold in New York for months and months? Am I--twenty? I thank you. Twenty-twenty-twenty-twenty. YOUR opportunity! Priceless. Very few extant. Twenty-five-five-five-five-thirty-thirty. Just what you are looking for. The only one in the City of New York. Thirty-five-five-five-five. Forty-forty-forty-forty-forty. Look at those legs! Back it into the light, Willie. Let the light fall on those legs!"

Willie, a sort of acolyte, manoeuvred the chair as directed. Reggie van Tuyl, who had been yawning in a hopeless sort of way, showed his first flicker of interest.

"Willie," he observed, eyeing that youth more with pity than reproach, "has a face like Jo-Jo the dog-faced boy, don't you think so?"

Archie nodded briefly. Precisely the same criticism had occurred to him.

"Forty-five-five-five-five-five," chanted the high-priest. "Once forty-five. Twice forty-five. Third and last call, forty-five. Sold at forty-five. Gentleman in the fifth row."

Archie looked up and down the row with a keen eye. He was anxious to see who had been chump enough to give forty-five dollars for such a frightful object. He became aware of the dog-faced Willie leaning towards him.

"Name, please?" said the canine one.

"Eh, what?" said Archie. "Oh, my name's Moffam, don't you know." The eyes of the multitude made him feel a little nervous "Er--glad to meet you and all that sort of rot."

"Ten dollars deposit, please," said Willie.

"I don't absolutely follow you, old bean. What is the big thought at the back of all this?"

"Ten dollars deposit on the chair."

"What chair?"

"You bid forty-five dollars for the chair."

"Me?"

"You nodded," said Willie, accusingly. "If," he went on, reasoning closely, "you didn't want to bid, why did you nod?"

Archie was embarrassed. He could, of course, have pointed out that he had merely nodded in adhesion to the statement that the other had a face like Jo-Jo the dog-faced boy; but something seemed to tell him that a purist might consider the excuse deficient in tact. He hesitated a moment, then handed over a ten-dollar bill, the price of Willie's feelings. Willie withdrew like a tiger slinking from the body of its victim.

"I say, old thing," said Archie to Reggie, "this is a bit thick, you know. No purse will stand this drain."

Reggie considered the matter. His face seemed drawn under the mental strain.

"Don't nod again," he advised. "If you aren't careful, you get into the habit of it. When you want to bid, just twiddle your fingers. Yes, that's the thing. Twiddle!"

He sighed drowsily. The atmosphere of the auction room was close; you weren't allowed to smoke; and altogether he was beginning to regret that he had come. The service continued. Objects of varying unattractiveness came and went, eulogised by the officiating priest, but coldly received by the congregation. Relations between the former and the latter were growing more and more distant. The congregation seemed to suspect the priest of having an ulterior motive in his eulogies, and the priest seemed to suspect the congregation of a frivolous desire to waste his time. He had begun to speculate openly as to why they were there at all. Once, when a particularly repellent statuette of a nude female with an unwholesome green skin had been offered at two dollars and had found no bidders--the congregation appearing silently grateful for his statement that it was the only specimen of its kind on the continent--he had specifically accused them of having come into the auction room merely with the purpose of sitting down and taking the weight off their feet.

"If your thing--your whatever-it-is, doesn't come up soon, Archie," said Reggie, fighting off with an effort the mists of sleep, "I rather think I shall be toddling along. What was it you came to get?"

"It's rather difficult to describe. It's a rummy-looking sort of what-not, made of china or something. I call it Pongo. At least, this one isn't Pongo, don't you know--it's his little brother, but presumably equally foul in every respect. It's all rather complicated, I know, but--hallo!" He pointed excitedly. "By Jove! We're off! There it is! Look! Willie's unleashing it now!"

Willie, who had disappeared through the gold curtain, had now returned, and was placing on a pedestal a small china figure of delicate workmanship. It was the figure of a warrior in a suit of armour advancing with raised spear upon an adversary. A thrill permeated Archie's frame. Parker had not been mistaken. This was undoubtedly the companion-figure to the redoubtable Pongo. The two were identical. Even from where he sat Archie could detect on the features of the figure on the pedestal the same expression of insufferable complacency which had alienated his sympathies from the original Pongo.

The high-priest, undaunted by previous rebuffs, regarded the figure with a gloating enthusiasm wholly unshared by the congregation, who were plainly looking upon Pongo's little brother as just another of those things.

"This," he said, with a shake in his voice, "is something very special. China figure, said to date back to the Ming Dynasty. Unique. Nothing like it on either side of the Atlantic. If I were selling this at Christie's in London, where people," he said, nastily, "have an educated appreciation of the beautiful, the rare, and the exquisite, I should start the bidding at a thousand dollars. This afternoon's experience has taught me that that might possibly be too high." His pince-nez sparkled militantly, as he gazed upon the stolid throng. "Will anyone offer me a dollar for this unique figure?"

"Leap at it, old top," said Reggie van Tuyl. "Twiddle, dear boy, twiddle! A dollar's reasonable."

Archie twiddled.

"One dollar I am offered," said the high-priest, bitterly. "One gentleman here is not afraid to take a chance. One gentleman here knows a good thing when he sees one." He abandoned the gently sarcastic manner for one of crisp and direct reproach. "Come, come, gentlemen, we are not here to waste time. Will anyone offer me one hundred dollars for this superb piece of--" He broke off, and seemed for a moment almost unnerved. He stared at someone in one of the seats in front of Archie. "Thank you," he said, with a sort of gulp. "One hundred dollars I am offered! One hundred--one hundred--one hundred--"

Archie was startled. This sudden, tremendous jump, this wholly unforeseen boom in Pongos, if one might so describe it, was more than a little disturbing. He could not see who his rival was, but it was evident that at least one among those present did not intend to allow Pongo's brother to slip by without a fight. He looked helplessly at Reggie for counsel, but Reggie had now definitely given up the struggle. Exhausted nature had done its utmost, and now he was leaning back with closed eyes, breathing softly through his nose. Thrown on his own resources, Archie could think of no better course than to twiddle his fingers again. He did so, and the high-priest's chant took on a note of positive exuberance.

"Two hundred I am offered. Much better! Turn the pedestal round, Willie, and let them look at it. Slowly! Slowly! You aren't spinning a roulette-wheel. Two hundred. Two-two-two-two-two." He became suddenly lyrical. "Two-two-two--There was a young lady named Lou, who was catching a train at two-two. Said the porter, 'Don't worry or hurry or scurry. It's a minute or two to two-two!' Two-two-two-two-two!"

Archie's concern increased. He seemed to be twiddling at this voluble man across seas of misunderstanding. Nothing is harder to interpret to a nicety than a twiddle, and Archie's idea of the language of twiddles and the high-priest's idea did not coincide by a mile. The high-priest appeared to consider that, when Archie twiddled, it was his intention to bid in hundreds, whereas in fact Archie had meant to signify that he raised the previous bid by just one dollar. Archie felt that, if given time, he could make this clear to the high-priest, but the latter gave him no time. He had got his audience, so to speak, on the run, and he proposed to hustle them before they could rally.

"Two hundred--two hundred--two--three--thank you, sir--three-three-three-four-four-five-five-six-six-seven-seven--"

Archie sat limply in his wooden chair. He was conscious of a feeling which he had only experienced twice in his life--once when he had taken his first lesson in driving a motor and had trodden on the accelerator instead of the brake; the second time more recently, when he had made

his first down-trip on an express lift. He had now precisely the same sensation of being run away with by an uncontrollable machine, and of having left most of his internal organs at some little distance from the rest of his body. Emerging from this welter of emotion, stood out the one clear fact that, be the opposition bidding what it might, he must nevertheless secure the prize. Lucille had sent him to New York expressly to do so. She had sacrificed her jewellery for the cause. She relied on him. The enterprise had become for Archie something almost sacred. He felt dimly like a knight of old hot on the track of the Holy Grail.

He twiddled again. The ring and the bracelet had fetched nearly twelve hundred dollars. Up to that figure his hat was in the ring.

"Eight hundred I am offered. Eight hundred. Eight-eight-eight-eight--"

A voice spoke from somewhere at the back of the room. A quiet, cold, nasty, determined voice.

"Nine!"

Archie rose from his seat and spun round. This mean attack from the rear stung his fighting spirit. As he rose, a young man sitting immediately in front of him rose too and stared likewise. He was a square-built resolute-looking young man, who reminded Archie vaguely of somebody he had seen before. But Archie was too busy trying to locate the man at the

back to pay much attention to him. He detected him at last, owing to the fact that the eyes of everybody in that part of the room were fixed upon him. He was a small man of middle age, with tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles. He might have been a professor or something of the kind. Whatever he was, he was obviously a man to be reckoned with. He had a rich sort of look, and his demeanour was the demeanour of a man who is prepared to fight it out on these lines if it takes all the summer.

"Nine hundred I am offered. Nine-nine-nine-nine--"

Archie glared defiantly at the spectacled man.

"A thousand!" he cried.

The irruption of high finance into the placid course of the afternoon's proceedings had stirred the congregation out of its lethargy. There were excited murmurs. Necks were craned, feet shuffled. As for the high-priest, his cheerfulness was now more than restored, and his faith in his fellow-man had soared from the depths to a very lofty altitude. He beamed with approval. Despite the warmth of his praise he would have been quite satisfied to see Pongo's little brother go at twenty dollars, and the reflection that the bidding had already reached one thousand and that his commission was twenty per cent, had engendered a mood of sunny happiness.

"One thousand is bid!" he carolled. "Now, gentlemen, I don't want to

hurry you over this. You are all connoisseurs here, and you don't want to see a priceless china figure of the Ming Dynasty get away from you at a sacrifice price. Perhaps you can't all see the figure where it is. Willie, take it round and show it to 'em. We'll take a little intermission while you look carefully at this wonderful figure. Get a move on, Willie! Pick up your feet!"

Archie, sitting dazedly, was aware that Reggie van Tuyl had finished his beauty sleep and was addressing the young man in the seat in front.

"Why, hallo," said Reggie. "I didn't know you were back. You remember me, don't you? Reggie van Tuyl. I know your sister very well. Archie, old man, I want you to meet my friend, Bill Brewster. Why, dash it!" He chuckled sleepily. "I was forgetting. Of course! He's your--"

"How are you?" said the young man. "Talking of my sister," he said to Reggie, "I suppose you haven't met her husband by any chance? I suppose you know she married some awful chump?"

"Me," said Archie.

"How's that?"

"I married your sister. My name's Moffam."

The young man seemed a trifle taken aback.

"Sorry," he said.

"Not at all," said Archie.

"I was only going by what my father said in his letters," he explained, in extenuation.

Archie nodded.

"I'm afraid your jolly old father doesn't appreciate me. But I'm hoping for the best. If I can rope in that rummy-looking little china thing that Jo-Jo the dog-faced boy is showing the customers, he will be all over me. I mean to say, you know, he's got another like it, and, if he can get a full house, as it were, I'm given to understand he'll be bucked, cheered, and even braced."

The young man stared.

"Are YOU the fellow who's been bidding against me?"

"Eh, what? Were you bidding against ME?"

"I wanted to buy the thing for my father. I've a special reason for wanting to get in right with him just now. Are you buying it for him, too?"

"Absolutely. As a surprise. It was Lucille's idea. His valet, a chappie named Parker, tipped us off that the thing was to be sold."

"Parker? Great Scot! It was Parker who tipped ME off. I met him on Broadway, and he told me about it."

"Rummy he never mentioned it in his letter to me. Why, dash it, we could have got the thing for about two dollars if we had pooled our bids."

"Well, we'd better pool them now, and extinguish that pill at the back there. I can't go above eleven hundred. That's all I've got."

"I can't go above eleven hundred myself."

"There's just one thing. I wish you'd let me be the one to hand the thing over to Father. I've a special reason for wanting to make a hit with him."

"Absolutely!" said Archie, magnanimously. "It's all the same to me. I only wanted to get him generally braced, as it were, if you know what I mean."

"That's awfully good of you."

"Not a bit, laddie, no, no, and far from it. Only too glad."

Willie had returned from his rambles among the connoisseurs, and Pongo's brother was back on his pedestal. The high-priest cleared his throat and resumed his discourse.

"Now that you have all seen this superb figure we will--I was offered one thousand--one thousand-one-one-one-one--eleven hundred. Thank you, sir. Eleven hundred I am offered."

The high-priest was now exuberant. You could see him doing figures in his head.

"You do the bidding," said Brother Bill.

"Right-o!" said Archie.

He waved a defiant hand.

"Thirteen," said the man at the back.

"Fourteen, dash it!"

"Fifteen!"

"Sixteen!"

"Seventeen!"

"Eighteen!"

"Nineteen!"

"Two thousand!"

The high-priest did everything but sing. He radiated good will and bonhomie.

"Two thousand I am offered. Is there any advance on two thousand? Come, gentlemen, I don't want to give this superb figure away. Twenty-one hundred. Twenty-one-one-one-one. This is more the sort of thing I have been accustomed to. When I was at Sotheby's Rooms in London, this kind of bidding was a common-place. Twenty-two-two-two-two-two. One hardly noticed it. Three-three-three. Twenty-three-three-three. Twenty-three hundred dollars I am offered."

He gazed expectantly at Archie, as a man gazes at some favourite dog whom he calls upon to perform a trick. But Archie had reached the end of his tether. The hand that had twiddled so often and so bravely lay inert beside his trouser-leg, twitching feebly. Archie was through.

"Twenty-three hundred," said the high-priest, ingratiatingly.

Archie made no movement. There was a tense pause. The high-priest gave a little sigh, like one waking from a beautiful dream.

"Twenty-three hundred," he said. "Once twenty-three. Twice twenty-three. Third, last, and final call, twenty-three. Sold at twenty-three hundred. I congratulate you, sir, on a genuine bargain!"

Reggie van Tuyl had dozed off again. Archie tapped his brother-in-law on the shoulder.

"May as well be popping, what?"

They threaded their way sadly together through the crowd, and made for the street. They passed into Fifth Avenue without breaking the silence.

"Bally nuisance," said Archie, at last.

"Rotten!"

"Wonder who that chappie was?"

"Some collector, probably."

"Well, it can't be helped," said Archie.

Brother Bill attached himself to Archie's arm, and became communicative.

"I didn't want to mention it in front of van Tuyl," he said, "because he's such a talking-machine, and it would have been all over New York before dinner-time. But you're one of the family, and you can keep a secret."

"Absolutely! Silent tomb and what not."

"The reason I wanted that darned thing was because I've just got engaged to a girl over in England, and I thought that, if I could hand my father that china figure-thing with one hand and break the news with the other, it might help a bit. She's the most wonderful girl!"

"I'll bet she is," said Archie, cordially.

"The trouble is she's in the chorus of one of the revues over there, and Father is apt to kick. So I thought--oh, well, it's no good worrying now. Come along where it's quiet, and I'll tell you all about her."

"That'll be jolly," said Archie.