

CHAPTER XI. SALVATORE CHOOSES THE WRONG MOMENT

Archie reclaimed the family jewellery from its temporary home next morning; and, having done so, sauntered back to the Cosmopolis. He was surprised, on entering the lobby, to meet his father-in-law. More surprising still, Mr. Brewster was manifestly in a mood of extraordinary geniality. Archie could hardly believe his eyes when the other waved cheerily to him--nor his ears a moment later when Mr. Brewster, addressing him as "my boy," asked him how he was and mentioned that the day was a warm one.

Obviously this jovial frame of mind must be taken advantage of; and Archie's first thought was of the downtrodden Salvatore, to the tale of whose wrongs he had listened so sympathetically on the previous day. Now was plainly the moment for the waiter to submit his grievance, before some ebb-tide caused the milk of human kindness to flow out of Daniel Brewster. With a swift "Cheerio!" in his father-in-law's direction, Archie bounded into the grill-room. Salvatore, the hour for luncheon being imminent but not yet having arrived, was standing against the far wall in an attitude of thought.

"Laddie!" cried Archie.

"Sare?"

"A most extraordinary thing has happened. Good old Brewster has suddenly popped up through a trap and is out in the lobby now. And what's still more weird, he's apparently bucked."

"Sare?"

"Braced, you know. In the pink. Pleased about something. If you go to him now with that yarn of yours, you can't fail. He'll kiss you on both cheeks and give you his bank-roll and collar-stud. Charge along and ask the head-waiter if you can have ten minutes off."

Salvatore vanished in search of the potentate named, and Archie returned to the lobby to bask in the unwonted sunshine.

"Well, well, well, what!" he said. "I thought you were at Brookport."

"I came up this morning to meet a friend of mine," replied Mr. Brewster genially. "Professor Binstead."

"Don't think I know him."

"Very interesting man," said Mr. Brewster, still with the same uncanny amiability. "He's a dabbler in a good many things--science, phrenology, antiques. I asked him to bid for me at a sale yesterday. There was a little china figure--"

Archie's jaw fell.

"China figure?" he stammered feebly.

"Yes. The companion to one you may have noticed on my mantelpiece upstairs. I have been trying to get the pair of them for years. I should never have heard of this one if it had not been for that valet of mine, Parker. Very good of him to let me know of it, considering I had fired him. Ah, here is Binstead."-He moved to greet the small, middle-aged man with the tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles who was bustling across the lobby. "Well, Binstead, so you got it?"

"Yes."

"I suppose the price wasn't particularly stiff?"

"Twenty-three hundred."

"Twenty-three hundred!" Mr. Brewster seemed to reel in his tracks.

"Twenty-three HUNDRED!"

"You gave me carte blanche."

"Yes, but twenty-three hundred!"

"I could have got it for a few dollars, but unfortunately I was a little

late, and, when I arrived, some young fool had bid it up to a thousand, and he stuck to me till I finally shook him off at twenty-three hundred. Why, this is the very man! Is he a friend of yours?"

Archie coughed.

"More a relation than a friend, what? Son-in-law, don't you know!"

Mr. Brewster's amiability had vanished.

"What damned foolery have you been up to NOW?" he demanded. "Can't I move a step without stubbing my toe on you? Why the devil did you bid?"

"We thought it would be rather a fruity scheme. We talked it over and came to the conclusion that it was an egg. Wanted to get hold of the rummy little object, don't you know, and surprise you."

"Who's we?"

"Lucille and I."

"But how did you hear of it at all?"

"Parker, the valet-chappie, you know, wrote me a letter about it."

"Parker! Didn't he tell you that he had told me the figure was to be

sold?"

"Absolutely not!" A sudden suspicion came to Archie. He was normally a guileless young man, but even to him the extreme fishiness of the part played by Herbert Parker had become apparent. "I say, you know, it looks to me as if friend Parker had been having us all on a bit, what? I mean to say it was jolly old Herb, who tipped your son off--Bill, you know--to go and bid for the thing."

"Bill! Was Bill there?"

"Absolutely in person! We were bidding against each other like the dickens till we managed to get together and get acquainted. And then this bird--this gentleman--sailed in and started to slip it across us."

Professor Binstead chuckled--the care-free chuckle of a man who sees all those around him smitten in the pocket, while he himself remains untouched.

"A very ingenious rogue, this Parker of yours, Brewster. His method seems to have been simple but masterly. I have no doubt that either he or a confederate obtained the figure and placed it with the auctioneer, and then he ensured a good price for it by getting us all to bid against each other. Very ingenious!"

Mr. Brewster struggled with his feelings. Then he seemed to overcome

them and to force himself to look on the bright side.

"Well, anyway," he said. "I've got the pair of figures, and that's what I wanted. Is that it in that parcel?"

"This is it. I wouldn't trust an express company to deliver it. Suppose we go up to your room and see how the two look side by side."

They crossed the lobby to the lift.-The cloud was still on Mr. Brewster's brow as they stepped out and made their way to his suite. Like most men who have risen from poverty to wealth by their own exertions, Mr. Brewster objected to parting with his money unnecessarily, and it was plain that that twenty-three hundred dollars still rankled.

Mr. Brewster unlocked the door and crossed the room. Then, suddenly, he halted, stared, and stared again. He sprang to the bell and pressed it, then stood gurgling wordlessly.

"Anything wrong, old bean?" queried Archie, solicitously.

"Wrong! Wrong! It's gone!"

"Gone?"

"The figure!"

The floor-waiter had manifested himself silently in answer to the bell, and was standing in the doorway.

"Simmons!" Mr. Brewster turned to him wildly. "Has anyone been in this suite since I went away?"

"No, sir."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody except your valet, sir--Parker. He said he had come to fetch some things away. I supposed he had come from you, sir, with instructions."

"Get out!"

Professor Binstead had unwrapped his parcel, and had placed the Pongo on the table. There was a weighty silence. Archie picked up the little china figure and balanced it on the palm of his hand. It was a small thing, he reflected philosophically, but it had made quite a stir in the world.

Mr. Brewster fermented for a while without speaking.

"So," he said, at last, in a voice trembling with self-pity, "I have

been to all this trouble--"

"And expense," put in Professor Binstead, gently.

"Merely to buy back something which had been stolen from me! And, owing to your damned officiousness," he cried, turning on Archie, "I have had to pay twenty-three hundred dollars for it! I don't know why they make such a fuss about Job. Job never had anything like you around!"

"Of course," argued Archie, "he had one or two boils."

"Boils! What are boils?"

"Dashed sorry," murmured Archie. "Acted for the best. Meant well. And all that sort of rot!"

Professor Binstead's mind seemed occupied to the exclusion of all other aspects of the affair, with the ingenuity of the absent Parker.

"A cunning scheme!" he said. "A very cunning scheme! This man Parker must have a brain of no low order. I should like to feel his bumps!"

"I should like to give him some!" said the stricken Mr. Brewster. He breathed a deep breath. "Oh, well," he said, "situated as I am, with a crook valet and an imbecile son-in-law, I suppose I ought to be thankful that I've still got my own property, even if I have had to

pay twenty-three hundred dollars for the privilege of keeping it." He rounded on Archie, who was in a reverie. The thought of the unfortunate Bill had just crossed Archie's mind. It would be many moons, many weary moons, before Mr. Brewster would be in a suitable mood to listen sympathetically to the story of love's young dream. "Give me that figure!"

Archie continued to toy absently with Pongo. He was wondering now how best to break this sad occurrence to Lucille. It would be a disappointment for the poor girl.

"GIVE ME THAT FIGURE!"

Archie started violently. There was an instant in which Pongo seemed to hang suspended, like Mohammed's coffin, between heaven and earth, then the force of gravity asserted itself. Pongo fell with a sharp crack and disintegrated. And as it did so there was a knock at the door, and in walked a dark, furtive person, who to the inflamed vision of Mr. Daniel Brewster looked like something connected with the executive staff of the Black Hand. With all time at his disposal, the unfortunate Salvatore had selected this moment for stating his case.

"Get out!" bellowed Mr. Brewster. "I didn't ring for a waiter."

Archie, his mind reeling beneath the catastrophe, recovered himself sufficiently to do the honours. It was at his instigation that Salvatore

was there, and, greatly as he wished that he could have seen fit to choose a more auspicious moment for his business chat, he felt compelled to do his best to see him through.

"Oh, I say, half a second," he said. "You don't quite understand. As a matter of fact, this chappie is by way of being downtrodden and oppressed and what not, and I suggested that he should get hold of you and speak a few well-chosen words. Of course, if you'd rather--some other time--"

But Mr. Brewster was not permitted to postpone the interview. Before he could get his breath, Salvatore had begun to talk. He was a strong, ambidextrous talker, whom it was hard to interrupt; and it was not for some moments that Mr. Brewster succeeded in getting a word in. When he did, he spoke to the point. Though not a linguist, he had been able to follow the discourse closely enough to realise that the waiter was dissatisfied with conditions in his hotel; and Mr. Brewster, as has been indicated, had a short way with people who criticised the Cosmopolis.

"You're fired!" said Mr. Brewster.

"Oh, I say!" protested Archie.

Salvatore muttered what sounded like a passage from Dante.

"Fired!" repeated Mr. Brewster resolutely. "And I wish to heaven," he

added, eyeing his son-in-law malignantly, "I could fire you!"

"Well," said Professor Binstead cheerfully, breaking the grim silence which followed this outburst, "if you will give me your cheque, Brewster, I think I will be going. Two thousand three hundred dollars. Make it open, if you will, and then I can run round the corner and cash it before lunch. That will be capital!"