

## CHAPTER XII. BRIGHT EYES--AND A FLY

The Hermitage (unrivalled scenery, superb cuisine, Daniel Brewster, proprietor) was a picturesque summer hotel in the green heart of the mountains, built by Archie's father-in-law shortly after he assumed control of the Cosmopolis. Mr. Brewster himself seldom went there, preferring to concentrate his attention on his New York establishment; and Archie and Lucille, breakfasting in the airy dining-room some ten days after the incidents recorded in the last chapter, had consequently to be content with two out of the three advertised attractions of the place. Through the window at their side quite a slab of the unrivalled scenery was visible; some of the superb cuisine was already on the table; and the fact that the eye searched in vain for Daniel Brewster, proprietor, filled Archie, at any rate, with no sense of aching loss. He bore it with equanimity and even with positive enthusiasm. In Archie's opinion, practically all a place needed to make it an earthly Paradise was for Mr. Daniel Brewster to be about forty-seven miles away from it.

It was at Lucille's suggestion that they had come to the Hermitage.

Never a human sunbeam, Mr. Brewster had shown such a bleak front to the world, and particularly to his son-in-law, in the days following the Pongo incident, that Lucille had thought that he and Archie would for a time at least be better apart--a view with which her husband cordially agreed. He had enjoyed his stay at the Hermitage, and now he regarded the eternal hills with the comfortable affection of a healthy man who is

breakfasting well.

"It's going to be another perfectly topping day," he observed, eyeing the shimmering landscape, from which the morning mists were swiftly shredding away like faint puffs of smoke. "Just the day you ought to have been here."

"Yes, it's too bad I've got to go. New York will be like an oven."

"Put it off."

"I can't, I'm afraid. I've a fitting."

Archie argued no further. He was a married man of old enough standing to know the importance of fittings.

"Besides," said Lucille, "I want to see father." Archie repressed an exclamation of astonishment. "I'll be back to-morrow evening. You will be perfectly happy."

"Queen of my soul, you know I can't be happy with you away. You know--"

"Yes?" murmured Lucille, appreciatively. She never tired of hearing Archie say this sort of thing.

Archie's voice had trailed off. He was looking across the room.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "What an awfully pretty woman!"

"Where?"

"Over there. Just coming in, I say, what wonderful eyes! I don't think I ever saw such eyes. Did you notice her eyes? Sort of flashing! Awfully pretty woman!"

Warm though the morning was, a suspicion of chill descended upon the breakfast-table. A certain coldness seemed to come into Lucille's face. She could not always share Archie's fresh young enthusiasms.

"Do you think so?"

"Wonderful figure, too!"

"Yes?"

"Well, what I mean to say, fair to medium," said Archie, recovering a certain amount of that intelligence which raises man above the level of the beasts of the field. "Not the sort of type I admire myself, of course."

"You know her, don't you?"

"Absolutely not and far from it," said Archie, hastily. "Never met her in my life."

"You've seen her on the stage. Her name's Vera Silverton. We saw her in--"

"Of course, yes. So we did. I say, I wonder what she's doing here? She ought to be in New York, rehearsing. I remember meeting what's-his-name--you know--chappie who writes plays and what not--George Benham--I remember meeting George Benham, and he told me she was rehearsing in a piece of his called--I forget the name, but I know it was called something or other. Well, why isn't she?"

"She probably lost her temper and broke her contract and came away. She's always doing that sort of thing. She's known for it. She must be a horrid woman."

"Yes."

"I don't want to talk about her. She used to be married to someone, and she divorced him. And then she was married to someone else, and he divorced her. And I'm certain her hair wasn't that colour two years ago, and I don't think a woman ought to make up like that, and her dress is all wrong for the country, and those pearls can't be genuine, and I hate the way she rolls her eyes about, and pink doesn't suit her a bit. I think she's an awful woman, and I wish you wouldn't keep on talking

about her."

"Right-o!" said Archie, dutifully.

They finished breakfast, and Lucille went up to pack her bag. Archie strolled out on to the terrace outside the hotel, where he smoked, communed with nature, and thought of Lucille. He always thought of Lucille when he was alone, especially when he chanced to find himself in poetic surroundings like those provided by the unrivalled scenery encircling the Hotel Hermitage. The longer he was married to her the more did the sacred institution seem to him a good egg. Mr. Brewster might regard their marriage as one of the world's most unfortunate incidents, but to Archie it was, and always had been, a bit of all right. The more he thought of it the more did he marvel that a girl like Lucille should have been content to link her lot with that of a Class C specimen like himself. His meditations were, in fact, precisely what a happily-married man's meditations ought to be.

He was roused from them by a species of exclamation or cry almost at his elbow, and turned to find that the spectacular Miss Silverton was standing beside him. Her dubious hair gleamed in the sunlight, and one of the criticised eyes was screwed up. The other gazed at Archie with an expression of appeal.

"There's something in my eye," she said.

"No, really!"

"I wonder if you would mind? It would be so kind of you!"

Archie would have preferred to remove himself, but no man worthy of the name can decline to come to the rescue of womanhood in distress. To twist the lady's upper lid back and peer into it and jab at it with the corner of his handkerchief was the only course open to him. His conduct may be classed as not merely blameless but definitely praiseworthy. King Arthur's knights used to do this sort of thing all the time, and look what people think of them. Lucille, therefore, coming out of the hotel just as the operation was concluded, ought not to have felt the annoyance she did. But, of course, there is a certain superficial intimacy about the attitude of a man who is taking a fly out of a woman's eye which may excusably jar upon the sensibilities of his wife. It is an attitude which suggests a sort of rapprochement or camaraderie or, as Archie would have put it, what not.

"Thanks so much!" said Miss Silverton.

"Oh no, rather not," said Archie.

"Such a nuisance getting things in your eye."

"Absolutely!"

"I'm always doing it!"

"Rotten luck!"

"But I don't often find anyone as clever as you to help me."

Lucille felt called upon to break in on this feast of reason and flow of soul.

"Archie," she said, "if you go and get your clubs now, I shall just have time to walk round with you before my train goes."

"Oh, ah!" said Archie, perceiving her for the first time. "Oh, ah, yes, right-o, yes, yes, yes!"

On the way to the first tee it seemed to Archie that Lucille was distraught and abstracted in her manner; and it occurred to him, not for the first time in his life, what a poor support a clear conscience is in moments of crisis. Dash it all, he didn't see what else he could have done. Couldn't leave the poor female staggering about the place with squads of flies wedged in her eyeball. Nevertheless--

"Rotten thing getting a fly in your eye," he hazarded at length. "Dashed awkward, I mean."

"Or convenient."

"Eh?"

"Well, it's a very good way of dispensing with an introduction."

"Oh, I say! You don't mean you think--"

"She's a horrid woman!"

"Absolutely! Can't think what people see in her."

"Well, you seemed to enjoy fussing over her!"

"No, no! Nothing of the kind! She inspired me with absolute what-d'you-call-it--the sort of thing chappies do get inspired with, you know."

"You were beaming all over your face."

"I wasn't. I was just screwing up my face because the sun was in my eye."

"All sorts of things seem to be in people's eyes this morning!"

Archie was saddened. That this sort of misunderstanding should have occurred on such a topping day and at a moment when they were to be torn



asunder for about thirty-six hours made him feel--well, it gave him the pip. He had an idea that there were words which would have straightened everything out, but he was not an eloquent young man and could not find them. He felt aggrieved. Lucille, he considered, ought to have known that he was immune as regarded females with flashing eyes and experimentally-coloured hair. Why, dash it, he could have extracted flies from the eyes of Cleopatra with one hand and Helen of Troy with the other, simultaneously, without giving them a second thought. It was in depressed mood that he played a listless nine holes; nor had life brightened for him when he came back to the hotel two hours later, after seeing Lucille off in the train to New York. Never till now had they had anything remotely resembling a quarrel. Life, Archie felt, was a bit of a wash-out. He was disturbed and jumpy, and the sight of Miss Silverton, talking to somebody on a settee in the corner of the hotel lobby, sent him shooting off at right angles and brought him up with a bump against the desk behind which the room-clerk sat.

The room-clerk, always of a chatty disposition, was saying something to him, but Archie did not listen. He nodded mechanically. It was something about his room. He caught the word "satisfactory."

"Oh, rather, quite!" said Archie.

A fussy devil, the room-clerk! He knew perfectly well that Archie found his room satisfactory. These chappies gassed on like this so as to try to make you feel that the management took a personal interest in you.

It was part of their job. Archie beamed absently and went in to lunch. Lucille's empty seat stared at him mournfully, increasing his sense of desolation.

He was half-way through his lunch, when the chair opposite ceased to be vacant. Archie, transferring his gaze from the scenery outside the window, perceived that his friend, George Benham, the playwright, had materialised from nowhere and was now in his midst.

"Hallo!" he said.

George Benham was a grave young man whose spectacles gave him the look of a mournful owl. He seemed to have something on his mind besides the artistically straggling mop of black hair which swept down over his brow. He sighed wearily, and ordered fish-pie.

"I thought I saw you come through the lobby just now," he said.

"Oh, was that you on the settee, talking to Miss Silverton?"

"She was talking to ME," said the playwright, moodily.

"What are you doing here?" asked Archie. He could have wished Mr. Benham elsewhere, for he intruded on his gloom, but, the chappie being amongst those present, it was only civil to talk to him. "I thought you were in New York, watching the rehearsals of your jolly old drama."

"The rehearsals are hung up. And it looks as though there wasn't going to be any drama. Good Lord!" cried George Benham, with honest warmth, "with opportunities opening out before one on every side--with life extending prizes to one with both hands--when you see coal-heavers making fifty dollars a week and the fellows who clean out the sewers going happy and singing about their work--why does a man deliberately choose a job like writing plays? Job was the only man that ever lived who was really qualified to write a play, and he would have found it pretty tough going if his leading woman had been anyone like Vera Silverton!"

Archie--and it was this fact, no doubt, which accounted for his possession of such a large and varied circle of friends--was always able to shelve his own troubles in order to listen to other people's hard-luck stories.

"Tell me all, laddie," he said. "Release the film! Has she walked out on you?"

"Left us flat! How did you hear about it? Oh, she told you, of course?"

Archie hastened to try to dispel the idea that he was on any such terms of intimacy with Miss Silverton.

"No, no! My wife said she thought it must be something of that nature or

order when we saw her come in to breakfast. I mean to say," said Archie, reasoning closely, "woman can't come into breakfast here and be rehearsing in New York at the same time. Why did she administer the raspberry, old friend?"

Mr. Benham helped himself to fish-pie, and spoke dully through the steam.

"Well, what happened was this. Knowing her as intimately as you do--"

"I DON'T know her!"

"Well, anyway, it was like this. As you know, she has a dog--"

"I didn't know she had a dog," protested Archie. It seemed to him that the world was in conspiracy to link him with this woman.

"Well, she has a dog. A beastly great whacking brute of a bulldog. And she brings it to rehearsal." Mr. Benham's eyes filled with tears, as in his emotion he swallowed a mouthful of fish-pie some eighty-three degrees Fahrenheit hotter than it looked. In the intermission caused by this disaster his agile mind skipped a few chapters of the story, and, when he was able to speak again, he said, "So then there was a lot of trouble. Everything broke loose!"

"Why?" Archie was puzzled. "Did the management object to her bringing

the dog to rehearsal?"

"A lot of good that would have done! She does what she likes in the theatre."

"Then why was there trouble?"

"You weren't listening," said Mr. Benham, reproachfully. "I told you. This dog came snuffling up to where I was sitting--it was quite dark in the body of the theatre, you know--and I got up to say something about something that was happening on the stage, and somehow I must have given it a push with my foot."

"I see," said Archie, beginning to get the run of the plot. "You kicked her dog."

"Pushed it. Accidentally. With my foot."

"I understand. And when you brought off this kick--"

"Push," said Mr. Benham, austerely.

"This kick or push. When you administered this kick or push--"

"It was more a sort of light shove."

"Well, when you did whatever you did, the trouble started?"

Mr. Benham gave a slight shiver.

"She talked for a while, and then walked out, taking the dog with her. You see, this wasn't the first time it had happened."

"Good Lord! Do you spend your whole time doing that sort of thing?"

"It wasn't me the first time. It was the stage-manager. He didn't know whose dog it was, and it came waddling on to the stage, and he gave it a sort of pat, a kind of flick--"

"A slosh?"

"NOT a slosh," corrected Mr. Benham, firmly. "You might call it a tap--with the promptscript. Well, we had a lot of difficulty smoothing her over that time. Still, we managed to do it, but she said that if anything of the sort occurred again she would chuck up her part."

"She must be fond of the dog," said Archie, for the first time feeling a touch of goodwill and sympathy towards the lady.

"She's crazy about, it. That's what made it so awkward when I happened--quite inadvertently--to give it this sort of accidental shove. Well, we spent the rest of the day trying to get her on the 'phone at

her apartment, and finally we heard that she had come here. So I took the next train, and tried to persuade her to come back. She wouldn't listen. And that's how matters stand."

"Pretty rotten!" said Archie, sympathetically.

"You can bet it's pretty rotten--for me. There's nobody else who can play the part. Like a chump, I wrote the thing specially for her. It means the play won't be produced at all, if she doesn't do it. So you're my last hope!"

Archie, who was lighting a cigarette, nearly swallowed it.

"I am?"

"I thought you might persuade her. Point out to her what a lot hangs on her coming back. Jolly her along, YOU know the sort of thing!"

"But, my dear old friend, I tell you I don't know her!"

Mr. Benham's eyes opened behind their zareba of glass.

"Well, she knows YOU. When you came through the lobby just now she said that you were the only real human being she had ever met."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did take a fly out of her eye. But--"

"You did? Well, then, the whole thing's simple. All you have to do is to ask her how her eye is, and tell her she has the most beautiful eyes you ever saw, and coo a bit."

"But, my dear old son!" The frightful programme which his friend had mapped out stunned Archie. "I simply can't! Anything to oblige and all that sort of thing, but when it comes to cooing, distinctly Napoo!"

"Nonsense! It isn't hard to coo."

"You don't understand, laddie. You're not a married man. I mean to say, whatever you say for or against marriage--personally I'm all for it and consider it a ripe egg--the fact remains that it practically makes a chappie a spent force as a cooer. I don't want to dish you in any way, old bean, but I must firmly and resolutely decline to coo."

Mr. Benham rose and looked at his watch.

"I'll have to be moving," he said. "I've got to get back to New York and report. I'll tell them that I haven't been able to do anything myself, but that I've left the matter in good hands. I know you will do your best."

"But, laddie!"



"Think," said Mr. Benham, solemnly, "of all that depends on it! The other actors! The small-part people thrown out of a job! Myself--but no! Perhaps you had better touch very lightly or not at all on my connection with the thing. Well, you know how to handle it. I feel I can leave it to you. Pitch it strong! Good-bye, my dear old man, and a thousand thanks. I'll do the same for you another time." He moved towards the door, leaving Archie transfixed. Half-way there he turned and came back. "Oh, by the way," he said, "my lunch. Have it put on your bill, will you? I haven't time to stay and settle. Good-bye! Good-bye!"