

CHAPTER XIII. RALLYING ROUND PERCY

It amazed Archie through the whole of a long afternoon to reflect how swiftly and unexpectedly the blue and brilliant sky of life can cloud over and with what abruptness a man who fancies that his feet are on solid ground can find himself immersed in Fate's gumbo. He recalled, with the bitterness with which one does recall such things, that that morning he had risen from his bed without a care in the world, his happiness unruffled even by the thought that Lucille would be leaving him for a short space. He had sung in his bath. Yes, he had chirruped like a bally linnet. And now--

Some men would have dismissed the unfortunate affairs of Mr. George Benham from their mind as having nothing to do with themselves, but Archie had never been made of this stern stuff. The fact that Mr. Benham, apart from being an agreeable companion with whom he had lunched occasionally in New York, had no claims upon him affected him little. He hated to see his fellowman in trouble. On the other hand, what could he do? To seek Miss Silverton out and plead with her--even if he did it without cooing--would undoubtedly establish an intimacy between them which, instinct told him, might tinge her manner after Lucille's return with just that suggestion of Auld Lang Syne which makes things so awkward.

His whole being shrank from extending to Miss Silverton that inch which

the female artistic temperament is so apt to turn into an ell; and when, just as he was about to go in to dinner, he met her in the lobby and she smiled brightly at him and informed him that her eye was now completely recovered, he shied away like a startled mustang of the prairie, and, abandoning his intention of worrying the table d'hote in the same room with the amiable creature, tottered off to the smoking-room, where he did the best he could with sandwiches and coffee.

Having got through the time as best he could till eleven o'clock, he went up to bed.

The room to which he and Lucille had been assigned by the management was on the second floor, pleasantly sunny by day and at night filled with cool and heartening fragrance of the pines. Hitherto Archie had always enjoyed taking a final smoke on the balcony overlooking the woods, but, to-night such was his mental stress that he prepared to go to bed directly he had closed the door. He turned to the cupboard to get his pyjamas.

His first thought, when even after a second scrutiny no pyjamas were visible, was that this was merely another of those things which happen on days when life goes wrong. He raked the cupboard for a third time with an annoyed eye. From every hook hung various garments of Lucille's, but no pyjamas. He was breathing a soft malediction preparatory to embarking on a point-to-point hunt for his missing property, when something in the cupboard caught his eye and held him for a moment

puzzled.

He could have sworn that Lucille did not possess a mauve negligé. Why, she had told him a dozen times that mauve was a colour which she did not like. He frowned perplexedly; and as he did so, from near the window came a soft cough.

Archie spun round and subjected the room to as close a scrutiny as that which he had bestowed upon the cupboard. Nothing was visible. The window opening on to the balcony gaped wide. The balcony was manifestly empty.

"URRF!"

This time there was no possibility of error. The cough had come from the immediate neighbourhood of the window.

Archie was conscious of a pringly sensation about the roots of his closely-cropped back-hair, as he moved cautiously across the room. The affair was becoming uncanny; and, as he tip-toed towards the window, old ghost stories, read in lighter moments before cheerful fires with plenty of light in the room, flitted through his mind. He had the feeling--precisely as every chappie in those stories had had--that he was not alone.

Nor was he. In a basket behind an arm-chair, curled up, with his massive chin resting on the edge of the wicker-work, lay a fine bulldog.

"Urrf!" said the bulldog.

"Good God!" said Archie.

There was a lengthy pause in which the bulldog looked earnestly at Archie and Archie looked earnestly at the bulldog.

Normally, Archie was a dog-lover. His hurry was never so great as to prevent him stopping, when in the street, and introducing himself to any dog he met. In a strange house, his first act was to assemble the canine population, roll it on its back or backs, and punch it in the ribs. As a boy, his earliest ambition had been to become a veterinary surgeon; and, though the years had cheated him of his career, he knew all about dogs, their points, their manners, their customs, and their treatment in sickness and in health. In short, he loved dogs, and, had they met under happier conditions, he would undoubtedly have been on excellent terms with this one within the space of a minute. But, as things were, he abstained from fraternising and continued to goggle dumbly.

And then his eye, wandering aside, collided with the following objects: a fluffy pink dressing-gown, hung over the back of a chair, an entirely strange suit-case, and, on the bureau, a photograph in a silver frame of a stout gentleman in evening-dress whom he had never seen before in his life.

Much has been written of the emotions of the wanderer who, returning to his childhood home, finds it altered out of all recognition; but poets have neglected the theme--far more poignant--of the man who goes up to his room in an hotel and finds it full of somebody else's dressing-gowns and bulldogs.

Bulldogs! Archie's heart jumped sideways and upwards with a wiggling movement, turning two somersaults, and stopped beating. The hideous truth, working its way slowly through the concrete, had at last penetrated to his brain. He was not only in somebody else's room, and a woman's at that. He was in the room belonging to Miss Vera Silverton.

He could not understand it. He would have been prepared to stake the last cent he could borrow from his father-in-law on the fact that he had made no error in the number over the door. Yet, nevertheless, such was the case, and, below par though his faculties were at the moment, he was sufficiently alert to perceive that it behoved him to withdraw.

He leaped to the door, and, as he did so, the handle began to turn.

The cloud which had settled on Archie's mind lifted abruptly. For an instant he was enabled to think about a hundred times more quickly than was his leisurely wont. Good fortune had brought him to within easy reach of the electric-light switch. He snapped it back, and was in darkness. Then, diving silently and swiftly to the floor, he wriggled under the bed. The thud of his head against what appeared to be some

sort of joist or support, unless it had been placed there by the maker as a practical joke, on the chance of this kind of thing happening some day, coincided with the creak of the opening door. Then the light was switched on again, and the bulldog in the corner gave a welcoming woofle.

"And how is mamma's precious angel?"

Rightly concluding that the remark had not been addressed to himself and that no social obligation demanded that he reply, Archie pressed his cheek against the boards and said nothing. The question was not repeated, but from the other side of the room came the sound of a patted dog.

"Did he think his muzzer had fallen down dead and was never coming up?"

The beautiful picture which these words conjured up filled Archie with that yearning for the might-have-been which is always so painful. He was finding his position physically as well as mentally distressing. It was cramped under the bed, and the boards were harder than anything he had ever encountered. Also, it appeared to be the practice of the housemaids at the Hotel Hermitage to use the space below the beds as a depository for all the dust which they swept off the carpet, and much of this was insinuating itself into his nose and mouth. The two things which Archie would have liked most to do at that moment were first to kill Miss Silverton--if possible, painfully--and then to spend the remainder of

his life sneezing.

After a prolonged period he heard a drawer open, and noted the fact as promising. As the old married man, he presumed that it signified the putting away of hair-pins. About now the dashed woman would be looking at herself in the glass with her hair down. Then she would brush it. Then she would twiddle it up into thingummies. Say, ten minutes for this. And after that she would go to bed and turn out the light, and he would be able, after giving her a bit of time to go to sleep, to creep out and leg it. Allowing at a conservative estimate three-quarters of--

"Come out!"

Archie stiffened. For an instant a feeble hope came to him that this remark, like the others, might be addressed to the dog.

"Come out from under that bed!" said a stern voice. "And mind how you come! I've got a pistol!"

"Well, I mean to say, you know," said Archie, in a propitiatory voice, emerging from his lair like a tortoise and smiling as winningly as a man can who has just bumped his head against the leg of a bed, "I suppose all this seems fairly rummy, but--"

"For the love of Mike!" said Miss Silverton.

The point seemed to Archie well taken and the comment on the situation neatly expressed.

"What are you doing in my room?"

"Well, if it comes to that, you know--shouldn't have mentioned it if you hadn't brought the subject up in the course of general chit-chat--what are you doing in mine?"

"Yours?"

"Well, apparently there's been a bloomer of some species somewhere, but this was the room I had last night," said Archie.

"But the desk-clerk said that he had asked you if it would be quite satisfactory to you giving it up to me, and you said yes. I come here every summer, when I'm not working, and I always have this room."

"By Jove! I remember now. The chappie did say something to me about the room, but I was thinking of something else and it rather went over the top. So that's what he was talking about, was it?"

Miss Silverton was frowning. A moving-picture director, scanning her face, would have perceived that she was registering disappointment.

"Nothing breaks right for me in this darned world," she said,

regretfully. "When I caught sight of your leg sticking out from under the bed, I did think that everything was all lined up for a real find and, at last, I could close my eyes and see the thing in the papers. On the front page, with photographs: 'Plucky Actress Captures Burglar.' Darn it!"

"Fearfully sorry, you know!"

"I just needed something like that. I've got a Press-agent, and I will say for him that he eats well and sleeps well and has just enough intelligence to cash his monthly cheque without forgetting what he went into the bank for, but outside of that you can take it from me he's not one of the world's workers! He's about as much solid use to a girl with aspirations as a pain in the lower ribs. It's three weeks since he got me into print at all, and then the brightest thing he could think up was that my favourite breakfast-fruit was an apple. Well, I ask you!"

"Rotten!" said Archie.

"I did think that for once my guardian angel had gone back to work and was doing something for me. 'Stage Star and Midnight Marauder,'" murmured Miss Silverton, wistfully. "'Footlight Favourite Foils Felon.'"

"Bit thick!" agreed Archie, sympathetically. "Well, you'll probably be wanting to get to bed and all that sort of rot, so I may as well be popping, what! Cheerio!"

A sudden gleam came into Miss Silverton's compelling eyes.

"Wait!"

"Eh?"

"Wait! I've got an idea!" The wistful sadness had gone from her manner. She was bright and alert. "Sit down!"

"Sit down?"

"Sure. Sit down and take the chill off the arm-chair. I've thought of something."

Archie sat down as directed. At his elbow the bulldog eyed him gravely from the basket.

"Do they know you in this hotel?"

"Know me? Well, I've been here about a week."

"I mean, do they know who you are? Do they know you're a good citizen?"

"Well, if it comes to that, I suppose they don't. But--"

"Fine!" said Miss Silverton, appreciatively. "Then it's all right. We can carry on!"

"Carry on!"

"Why, sure! All I want is to get the thing into the papers. It doesn't matter to me if it turns out later that there was a mistake and that you weren't a burglar trying for my jewels after all. It makes just as good a story either way. I can't think why that never struck me before. Here have I been kicking because you weren't a real burglar, when it doesn't amount to a hill of beans whether you are or not. All I've got to do is to rush out and yell and rouse the hotel, and they come in and pinch you, and I give the story to the papers, and everything's fine!"

Archie leaped from his chair.

"I say! What!"

"What's on your mind?" enquired Miss Silverton, considerately. "Don't you think it's a nifty scheme?"

"Nifty! My dear old soul! It's frightful!"

"Can't see what's wrong with it," grumbled Miss Silverton. "After I've had someone get New York on the long-distance 'phone and give the story to the papers you can explain, and they'll let you out. Surely to

goodness you don't object, as a personal favour to me, to spending an hour or two in a cell? Why, probably they haven't got a prison at all out in these parts, and you'll simply be locked in a room. A child of ten could do it on his head," said Miss Silverton. "A child of six," she emended.

"But, dash it--I mean--what I mean to say--I'm married!"

"Yes?" said Miss Silverton, with the politeness of faint interest. "I've been married myself. I wouldn't say it's altogether a bad thing, mind you, for those that like it, but a little of it goes a long way. My first husband," she proceeded, reminiscently, "was a travelling man. I gave him a two-weeks' try-out, and then I told him to go on travelling. My second husband--now, HE wasn't a gentleman in any sense of the word. I remember once--"

"You don't grasp the point. The jolly old point! You fail to grasp it. If this bally thing comes out, my wife will be most frightfully sick!"

Miss Silverton regarded him with pained surprise.

"Do you mean to say you would let a little thing like that stand in the way of my getting on the front page of all the papers--WITH photographs? Where's your chivalry?"

"Never mind my dashed chivalry!"

"Besides, what does it matter if she does get a little sore? She'll soon get over it. You can put that right. Buy her a box of candy. Not that I'm strong for candy myself. What I always say is, it may taste good, but look what it does to your hips! I give you my honest word that, when I gave up eating candy, I lost eleven ounces the first week. My second husband--no, I'm a liar, it was my third--my third husband said--Say, what's the big idea? Where are you going?"

"Out!" said Archie, firmly. "Bally out!"

A dangerous light flickered in Miss Silverton's eyes.

"That'll be all of that!" she said, raising the pistol. "You stay right where you are, or I'll fire!"

"Right-o!"

"I mean it!"

"My dear old soul," said Archie, "in the recent unpleasantness in France I had chappies popping off things like that at me all day and every day for close on five years, and here I am, what! I mean to say, if I've got to choose between staying here and being pinched in your room by the local constabulary and having the dashed thing get into the papers and all sorts of trouble happening, and my wife getting the wind up and--I

say, if I've got to choose--"

"Suck a lozenge and start again!" said Miss Silverton.

"Well, what I mean to say is, I'd much rather take a chance of getting a bullet in the old bean than that. So loose it off and the best o' luck!"

Miss Silverton lowered the pistol, sank into a chair, and burst into tears.

"I think you're the meanest man I ever met!" she sobbed. "You know perfectly well the bang would send me into a fit!"

"In that case," said Archie, relieved, "cheerio, good luck, pip-pip, toodle-oo, and good-bye-ee! I'll be shifting!"

"Yes, you will!" cried Miss Silverton, energetically, recovering with amazing swiftness from her collapse. "Yes, you will, I by no means suppose! You think, just because I'm no champion with a pistol, I'm helpless. You wait! Percy!"

"My name is not Percy."

"I never said it was. Percy! Percy, come to muzzer!"

There was a creaking rustle from behind the arm-chair. A heavy body

flopped on the carpet. Out into the room, heaving himself along as though sleep had stiffened his joints, and breathing stertorously through his tilted nose, moved the fine bulldog. Seen in the open, he looked even more formidable than he had done in his basket.

"Guard him, Percy! Good dog, guard him! Oh, heavens! What's the matter with him?"

And with these words the emotional woman, uttering a wail of anguish, flung herself on the floor beside the animal.

Percy was, indeed, in manifestly bad shape. He seemed quite unable to drag his limbs across the room. There was a curious arch in his back, and, as his mistress touched him, he cried out plaintively,

"Percy! Oh, what IS the matter with him? His nose is burning!"

Now was the time, with both sections of the enemy's forces occupied, for Archie to have departed softly from the room. But never, since the day when at the age of eleven he had carried a large, damp, and muddy terrier with a sore foot three miles and deposited him on the best sofa in his mother's drawing-room, had he been able to ignore the spectacle of a dog in trouble.

"He does look bad, what!"

"He's dying! Oh, he's dying! Is it distemper? He's never had distemper."

Archie regarded the sufferer with the grave eye of the expert. He shook his head.

"It's not that," he said. "Dogs with distemper make a sort of sniffling noise."

"But he IS making a sniffling noise!"

"No, he's making a snuffling noise. Great difference between snuffling and sniffling. Not the same thing at all. I mean to say, when they sniff they sniff, and when they snuffle they--as it were--snuffle. That's how you can tell. If you ask ME"--he passed his hand over the dog's back. Percy uttered another cry. "I know what's the matter with him."

"A brute of a man kicked him at rehearsal. Do you think he's injured internally?"

"It's rheumatism," said Archie. "Jolly old rheumatism. That's all that's the trouble."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely!"

"But what can I do?"

"Give him a good hot bath, and mind and dry him well. He'll have a good sleep then, and won't have any pain. Then, first thing to-morrow, you want to give him salicylate of soda."

"I'll never remember that."-"I'll write it down for you. You ought to give him from ten to twenty grains three times a day in an ounce of water. And rub him with any good embrocation."

"And he won't die?"

"Die! He'll live to be as old as you are!-I mean to say--"

"I could kiss you!" said Miss Silverton, emotionally.

Archie backed hastily.

"No, no, absolutely not! Nothing like that required, really!"

"You're a darling!"

"Yes. I mean no. No, no, really!"

"I don't know what to say. What can I say?"

"Good night," said Archie.

"I wish there was something I could do! If you hadn't been here, I should have gone off my head!"

A great idea flashed across Archie's brain.

"Do you really want to do something?"

"Anything!"

"Then I do wish, like a dear sweet soul, you would pop straight back to New York to-morrow and go on with those rehearsals."

Miss Silverton shook her head.

"I can't do that!"

"Oh, right-o! But it isn't much to ask, what!"

"Not much to ask! I'll never forgive that man for kicking Percy!"

"Now listen, dear old soul. You've got the story all wrong. As a matter of fact, jolly old Benham told me himself that he has the greatest esteem and respect for Percy, and wouldn't have kicked him for the world. And, you know it was more a sort of push than a kick. You might

almost call it a light shove. The fact is, it was beastly dark in the theatre, and he was legging it sideways for some reason or other, no doubt with the best motives, and unfortunately he happened to stub his toe on the poor old bean."

"Then why didn't he say so?"

"As far as I could make out, you didn't give him a chance."

Miss Silverton wavered.

"I always hate going back after I've walked out on a show," she said.

"It seems so weak!"

"Not a bit of it! They'll give three hearty cheers and think you a topper. Besides, you've got to go to New York in any case. To take Percy to a vet., you know, what!"

"Of course. How right you always are!" Miss Silverton hesitated again.

"Would you really be glad if I went back to the show?"

"I'd go singing about the hotel! Great pal of mine, Benham. A thoroughly cheery old bean, and very cut up about the whole affair. Besides, think of all the coves thrown out of work--the thingummabobs and the poor what-d'you-call-'ems!"

"Very well."

"You'll do it?"

"Yes."

"I say, you really are one of the best! Absolutely like mother made!
That's fine! Well, I think I'll be saying good night."

"Good night. And thank you so much!"

"Oh, no, rather not!"

Archie moved to the door.

"Oh, by the way."

"Yes?"

"If I were you, I think I should catch the very first train you can get
to New York. You see--er--you ought to take Percy to the vet. as soon as
ever you can."

"You really do think of everything," said Miss Silverton.

"Yes," said Archie, meditatively.