

CHAPTER XIV. THE SAD CASE OF LOONEY BIDDLE

Archie was a simple soul, and, as is the case with most simple souls, gratitude came easily to him. He appreciated kind treatment. And when, on the following day, Lucille returned to the Hermitage, all smiles and affection, and made no further reference to Beauty's Eyes and the flies that got into them, he was conscious of a keen desire to show some solid recognition of this magnanimity. Few wives, he was aware, could have had the nobility and what not to refrain from occasionally turning the conversation in the direction of the above-mentioned topics. It had not needed this behaviour on her part to convince him that Lucille was a topper and a corker and one of the very best, for he had been cognisant of these facts since the first moment he had met her: but what he did feel was that she deserved to be rewarded in no uncertain manner. And it seemed a happy coincidence to him that her birthday should be coming along in the next week or so. Surely, felt Archie, he could whack up some sort of a not unjuicy gift for that occasion--something pretty ripe that would make a substantial hit with the dear girl. Surely something would come along to relieve his chronic impecuniosity for just sufficient length of time to enable him to spread himself on this great occasion.

And, as if in direct answer to prayer, an almost forgotten aunt in England suddenly, out of an absolutely blue sky, shot no less a sum than

five hundred dollars across the ocean. The present was so lavish and unexpected that Archie had the awed feeling of one who participates in a miracle. He felt, like Herbert Parker, that the righteous was not forsaken. It was the sort of thing that restored a fellow's faith in human nature. For nearly a week he went about in a happy trance: and when, by thrift and enterprise--that is to say, by betting Reggie van Tuyl that the New York Giants would win the opening game of the series against the Pittsburg baseball team--he contrived to double his capital, what it amounted to was simply that life had nothing more to offer. He was actually in a position to go to a thousand dollars for Lucille's birthday present. He gathered in Mr. van Tuyl, of whose taste in these matters he had a high opinion, and dragged him off to a jeweller's on Broadway.

The jeweller, a stout, comfortable man, leaned on the counter and fingered lovingly the bracelet which he had lifted out of its nest of blue plush. Archie, leaning on the other side of the counter, inspected the bracelet searchingly, wishing that he knew more about these things; for he had rather a sort of idea that the merchant was scheming to do him in the eyeball. In a chair by his side, Reggie van Tuyl, half asleep as usual, yawned despondently. He had permitted Archie to lug him into this shop; and he wanted to buy something and go. Any form of sustained concentration fatigued Reggie.

"Now this," said the jeweller, "I could do at eight hundred and fifty dollars."

"Grab it!" murmured Mr. van Tuyl.

The jeweller eyed him approvingly, a man after his own heart; but Archie looked doubtful. It was all very well for Reggie to tell him to grab it in that careless way. Reggie was a dashed millionaire, and no doubt bought bracelets by the pound or the gross or what not; but he himself was in an entirely different position.

"Eight hundred and fifty dollars!" he said, hesitating.

"Worth it," mumbled Reggie van Tuyl.

"More than worth it," amended the jeweller. "I can assure you that it is better value than you could get anywhere on Fifth Avenue."

"Yes?" said Archie. He took the bracelet and twiddled it thoughtfully.

"Well, my dear old jeweller, one can't say fairer than that, can one--or two, as the case may be!" He frowned. "Oh, well, all right! But it's rummy that women are so fearfully keen on these little thingummies, isn't it? I mean to say, can't see what they see in them. Stones, and all that. Still, there, it is, of course!"

"There," said the jeweller, "as you say, it is, sir."

"Yes, there it is!"

"Yes, there it is," said the jeweller, "fortunately for people in my line of business. Will you take it with you, sir?"

Archie reflected.

"No. No, not take it with me. The fact is, you know, my wife's coming back from the country to-night, and it's her birthday to-morrow, and the thing's for her, and, if it was popping about the place to-night, she might see it, and it would sort of spoil the surprise. I mean to say, she doesn't know I'm giving it her, and all that!"

"Besides," said Reggie, achieving a certain animation now that the tedious business interview was concluded, "going to the ball-game this afternoon--might get pocket picked--yes, better have it sent."

"Where shall I send it, sir?"

"Eh? Oh, shoot it along to Mrs. Archibald Moffam, at the Cosmopolis. Not to-day, you know. Buzz it in first thing to-morrow."

Having completed the satisfactory deal, the jeweller threw off the business manner and became chatty.

"So you are going to the ball-game? It should be an interesting contest."

Reggie van Tuyl, now--by his own standards--completely awake, took exception to this remark.

"Not a bit of it!" he said, decidedly. "No contest! Can't call it a contest! Walkover for the Pirates!"

Archie was stung to the quick. There is that about baseball which arouses enthusiasm and the partisan spirit in the unlikeliest bosoms. It is almost impossible for a man to live in America and not become gripped by the game; and Archie had long been one of its warmest adherents. He was a whole-hearted supporter of the Giants, and his only grievance against Reggie, in other respects an estimable young man, was that the latter, whose money had been inherited from steel-mills in that city, had an absurd regard for the Pirates of Pittsburg.

"What absolute bally rot!" he exclaimed. "Look what the Giants did to them yesterday!"

"Yesterday isn't to-day," said Reggie.

"No, it'll be a jolly sight worse," said Archie. "Looney Biddle'll be pitching for the Giants to-day."

"That's just what I mean. The Pirates have got him rattled. Look what happened last time."

Archie understood, and his generous nature chafed at the innuendo. Looney Biddle--so-called by an affectionately admiring public as the result of certain marked eccentricities--was beyond dispute the greatest left-handed pitcher New York had possessed in the last decade. But there was one blot on Mr. Biddle's otherwise stainless scutcheon. Five weeks before, on the occasion of the Giants' invasion of Pittsburg, he had gone mysteriously to pieces. Few native-born partisans, brought up to baseball from the cradle, had been plunged into a profounder gloom on that occasion than Archie; but his soul revolted at the thought that that sort of thing could ever happen again.

"I'm not saying," continued Reggie, "that Biddle isn't a very fair pitcher, but it's cruel to send him against the Pirates, and somebody ought to stop it. His best friends should interfere. Once a team gets a pitcher rattled, he's never any good against them again. He loses his nerve."

The jeweller nodded approval of this sentiment.

"They never come back," he said, sententiously.

The fighting blood of the Moffams was now thoroughly stirred. Archie eyed his friend sternly. Reggie was a good chap--in many respects an extremely sound egg--but he must not be allowed to talk rot of this description about the greatest left-handed pitcher of the age.

"It seems to me, old companion," he said, "that a small bet is indicated at this juncture. How about it?"

"Don't want to take your money."

"You won't have to! In the cool twilight of the merry old summer evening I, friend of my youth and companion of my riper years, shall be trousering yours."

Reggie yawned. The day was very hot, and this argument was making him feel sleepy again.

"Well, just as you like, of course. Double or quits on yesterday's bet, if that suits you."

For a moment Archie hesitated. Firm as his faith was in Mr. Biddle's stout left arm, he had not intended to do the thing on quite this scale. That thousand dollars of his was earmarked for Lucille's birthday present, and he doubted whether he ought to risk it. Then the thought that the honour of New York was in his hands decided him. Besides, the risk was negligible. Betting on Looney Biddle was like betting on the probable rise of the sun in the east. The thing began to seem to Archie a rather unusually sound and conservative investment. He remembered that the jeweller, until he drew him firmly but kindly to earth and urged him to curb his exuberance and talk business on a reasonable plane, had

started brandishing bracelets that cost about two thousand. There would be time to pop in at the shop this evening after the game and change the one he had selected for one of those. Nothing was too good for Lucille on her birthday.

"Right-o!" he said. "Make it so, old friend!"

Archie walked back to the Cosmopolis. No misgivings came to mar his perfect contentment. He felt no qualms about separating Reggie from another thousand dollars. Except for a little small change in the possession of the Messrs. Rockefeller and Vincent Astor, Reggie had all the money in the world and could afford to lose. He hummed a gay air as he entered the lobby and crossed to the cigar-stand to buy a few cigarettes to see him through the afternoon.

The girl behind the cigar counter welcomed him with a bright smile. Archie was popular with all the employes of the Cosmopolis.

"S a great day, Mr. Moffam!"

"One of the brightest and best," Agreed Archie. "Could you dig me out two, or possibly three, cigarettes of the usual description? I shall want something to smoke at the ball-game."

"You going to the ball-game?"

"Rather! Wouldn't miss it for a fortune."

"No?"

"Absolutely no! Not with jolly old Biddle pitching."

The cigar-stand girl laughed amusedly.

"Is he pitching this afternoon? Say, that feller's a nut? D'you know him?"

"Know him? Well, I've seen him pitch and so forth."

"I've got a girl friend who's engaged to him!"

Archie looked at her with positive respect. It would have been more dramatic, of course, if she had been engaged to the great man herself, but still the mere fact that she had a girl friend in that astounding position gave her a sort of halo.

"No, really!" he said. "I say, by Jove, really! Fancy that!"

"Yes, she's engaged to him all right. Been engaged close on a couple months now."

"I say! That's frightfully interesting! Fearfully interesting, really!"

"It's funny about that guy," said the cigar-stand girl. "He's a nut! The fellow who said there's plenty of room at the top must have been thinking of Gus Biddle's head! He's crazy about m' girl friend, y' know, and, whenever they have a fuss, it seems like he sort of flies right off the handle."

"Goes in off the deep end, eh?"

"Yes, SIR! Loses what little sense he's got. Why, the last time him and m' girl friend got to scrapping was when he was going on to Pittsburg to play, about a month ago. He'd been out with her the day he left for there, and he had a grouch or something, and he started making low, sneaky cracks about her Uncle Sigsbee. Well, m' girl friend's got a nice disposition, but she c'n get mad, and she just left him flat and told him all was over. And he went off to Pittsburg, and, when he started in to pitch the opening game, he just couldn't keep his mind on his job, and look what them assassins done to him! Five runs in the first innings! Yessir, he's a nut all right!"

Archie was deeply concerned. So this was the explanation of that mysterious disaster, that weird tragedy which had puzzled the sporting press from coast to coast.

"Good God! Is he often taken like that?"

"Oh, he's all right when he hasn't had a fuss with m' girl friend," said the cigar-stand girl, indifferently. Her interest in baseball was tepid. Women are too often like this--mere butterflies, with no concern for the deeper side of life.

"Yes, but I say! What I mean to say, you know! Are they pretty pally now? The good old Dove of Peace flapping its little wings fairly briskly and all that?"

"Oh, I guess everything's nice and smooth just now. I seen m' girl friend yesterday, and Gus was taking her to the movies last night, so I guess everything's nice and smooth."

Archie breathed a sigh of relief.

"Took her to the movies, did he? Stout fellow!"

"I was at the funniest picture last week," said the cigar-stand girl.

"Honest, it was a scream! It was like this--"

Archie listened politely; then went in to get a bite of lunch. His equanimity, shaken by the discovery of the rift in the peerless one's armour, was restored. Good old Biddle had taken the girl to the movies last night. Probably he had squeezed her hand a goodish bit in the dark. With what result? Why, the fellow would be feeling like one of those chappies who used to joust for the smiles of females in the Middle Ages.

What he meant to say, presumably the girl would be at the game this afternoon, whooping him on, and good old Biddle would be so full of beans and buck that there would be no holding him.

Encouraged by these thoughts, Archie lunched with an untroubled mind. Luncheon concluded, he proceeded to the lobby to buy back his hat and stick from the boy brigand with whom he had left them. It was while he was conducting this financial operation that he observed that at the cigar-stand, which adjoined the coat-and-hat alcove, his friend behind the counter had become engaged in conversation with another girl.

This was a determined looking young woman in a blue dress and a large hat of a bold and flowery species, Archie happening to attract her attention, she gave him a glance out of a pair of fine brown eyes, then, as if she did not think much of him, turned to her companion and resumed their conversation--which, being of an essentially private and intimate nature, she conducted, after the manner of her kind, in a ringing soprano which penetrated into every corner of the lobby. Archie, waiting while the brigand reluctantly made change for a dollar bill, was privileged to hear every word.

"Right from the start I seen he was in a ugly mood. YOU know how he gets, dearie! Chewing his upper lip and looking at you as if you were so much dirt beneath his feet! How was I to know he'd lost fifteen dollars fifty-five playing poker, and anyway, I don't see where he gets a licence to work off his grouches on me. And I told him so. I said to

him, 'Gus,' I said, 'if you can't be bright and smiling and cheerful when you take me out, why do you come round at all? Was I wrong or right, dearie?'

The girl behind the counter heartily endorsed her conduct. "Once you let a man think he could use you as a door-mat, where were you?"

"What happened then, honey?"

"Well, after that we went to the movies."

Archie started convulsively. The change from his dollar-bill leaped in his hand. Some of it sprang overboard and tinkled across the floor, with the brigand in pursuit. A monstrous suspicion had begun, to take root in his mind.

"Well, we got good seats, but--well, you know how it is, once things start going wrong. You know that hat of mine, the one with the daisies and cherries and the feather--I'd taken it off and given it him to hold when we went in, and what do you think that fell'r'd done? Put it on the floor and crammed it under the seat, just to save himself the trouble of holding it on his lap! And, when I showed him I was upset, all he said was that he was a pitcher and not a hatstand!"

Archie was paralysed. He paid no attention to the hat-check boy, who was trying to induce him to accept treasure-trove to the amount of

forty-five cents. His whole being was concentrated on this frightful tragedy which had burst upon him like a tidal wave. No possible room for doubt remained. "Gus" was the only Gus in New York that mattered, and this resolute and injured female before him was the Girl Friend, in whose slim hands rested the happiness of New York's baseball followers, the destiny of the unconscious Giants, and the fate of his thousand dollars. A strangled croak proceeded from his parched lips.

"Well, I didn't say anything at the moment. It just shows how them movies can work on a girl's feelings. It was a Bryant Washburn film, and somehow, whenever I see him on the screen, nothing else seems to matter. I just get that goo-ey feeling, and couldn't start a fight if you asked me to. So we go off to have a soda, and I said to him, 'That sure was a lovely film, Gus!' and would you believe me, he says straight out that he didn't think it was such a much, and he thought Bryant Washburn was a pill! A pill!" The Girl Friend's penetrating voice shook with emotion.

"He never!" exclaimed the shocked cigar-stand girl.

"He did, if I die the next moment! I wasn't more than half-way through my vanilla and maple, but I got up without a word and left him. And I ain't seen a sight of him since. So there you are, dearie! Was I right or wrong?"

The cigar-stand girl gave unqualified approval. What men like Gus Biddle needed for the salvation of their souls was an occasional good jolt

right where it would do most good.

"I'm glad you think I acted right, dearie," said the Girl Friend. "I guess I've been too weak with Gus, and he's took advantage of it. I s'pose I'll have to forgive him one of these old days, but, believe me, it won't be for a week."

The cigar-stand girl was in favour of a fortnight.

"No," said the Girl Friend, regretfully. "I don't believe I could hold out that long. But, if I speak to him inside a week, well--! Well, I gotta be going. Goodbye, honey."

The cigar-stand girl turned to attend to an impatient customer, and the Girl Friend, walking with the firm and decisive steps which indicate character, made for the swing-door leading to the street. And as she went, the paralysis which had pipped Archie released its hold. Still ignoring the forty-five cents which the boy continued to proffer, he leaped in her wake like a panther and came upon her just as she was stepping into a car. The car was full, but not too full for Archie. He dropped his five cents into the box and reached for a vacant strap. He looked down upon the flowered hat. There she was. And there he was. Archie rested his left ear against the forearm of a long, strongly-built young man in a grey suit who had followed him into the car and was sharing his strap, and pondered.