

CHAPTER XV. SUMMER STORMS

Of course, in a way, the thing was simple. The wheeze was, in a sense, straightforward and uncomplicated. What he wanted to do was to point out to the injured girl all that hung on her. He wished to touch her heart, to plead with her, to desire her to restate her war-aims, and to persuade her--before three o'clock when that stricken gentleman would be stepping into the pitcher's box to loose off the first ball against the Pittsburg Pirates--to let bygones be bygones and forgive Augustus Biddle. But the blighted problem was, how the deuce to find the opportunity to start. He couldn't yell at the girl in a crowded street-car; and, if he let go of his strap and bent over her, somebody would step on his neck.

The Girl Friend, who for the first five minutes had remained entirely concealed beneath her hat, now sought diversion by looking up and examining the faces of the upper strata of passengers. Her eye caught Archie's in a glance of recognition, and he smiled feebly, endeavouring to register bonhomie and good-will. He was surprised to see a startled expression come into her brown eyes. Her face turned pink. At least, it was pink already, but it turned pinker. The next moment, the car having stopped to pick up more passengers, she jumped off and started to hurry across the street.

Archie was momentarily taken aback. When embarking on this business he had never intended it to become a blend of otter-hunting and a moving-picture chase. He followed her off the car with a sense that his grip on the affair was slipping. Preoccupied with these thoughts, he did not perceive that the long young man who had shared his strap had alighted too. His eyes were fixed on the vanishing figure of the Girl Friend, who, having buzzed at a smart pace into Sixth Avenue, was now legging it in the direction of the staircase leading to one of the stations of the Elevated Railroad. Dashing up the stairs after her, he shortly afterwards found himself suspended as before from a strap, gazing upon the now familiar flowers on top of her hat. From another strap farther down the carriage swayed the long young man in the grey suit.

The train rattled on. Once or twice, when it stopped, the girl seemed undecided whether to leave or remain. She half rose, then sank back again. Finally she walked resolutely out of the car, and Archie, following, found himself in a part of New York strange to him. The inhabitants of this district appeared to eke out a precarious existence, not by taking in one another's washing, but by selling one another second-hand clothes.

Archie glanced at his watch. He had lunched early, but so crowded with emotions had been the period following lunch that he was surprised to find that the hour was only just two. The discovery was a pleasant one. With a full hour before the scheduled start of the game, much might be

achieved. He hurried after the girl, and came up with her just as she turned the corner into one of those forlorn New York side-streets which are populated chiefly by children, cats, desultory loafers, and empty meat-tins.

The girl stopped and turned. Archie smiled a winning smile.

"I say, my dear sweet creature!" he said. "I say, my dear old thing, one moment!"

"Is that so?" said the Girl Friend.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Is that so?"

Archie began to feel certain tremors. Her eyes were gleaming, and her determined mouth had become a perfectly straight line of scarlet. It was going to be difficult to be chatty to this girl. She was going to be a hard audience. Would mere words be able to touch her heart? The thought suggested itself that, properly speaking, one would need to use a pick-axe.

"If you could spare me a couples of minutes of your valuable time--"

"Say!" The lady drew herself up menacingly. "You tie a can to yourself

and disappear! Fade away, or I'll call a cop!"

Archie was horrified at this misinterpretation of his motives. One or two children, playing close at hand, and a loafer who was trying to keep the wall from falling down, seemed pleased. Theirs was a colourless existence and to the rare purple moments which had enlivened it in the past the calling of a cop had been the unfailing preliminary. The loafer nudged a fellow-loafer, sunning himself against the same wall. The children, abandoning the meat-tin round which their game had centred, drew closer.

"My dear old soul!" said Archie. "You don't understand!"

"Don't I! I know your sort, you trailing arbutus!"

"No, no! My dear old thing, believe me! I wouldn't dream!"

"Are you going or aren't you?"

Eleven more children joined the ring of spectators. The loafers stared silently, like awakened crocodiles.

"But, I say, listen! I only wanted--"

At this point another voice spoke.

"Say!"

The word "Say!" more almost than any word in the American language, is capable of a variety of shades of expression. It can be genial, it can be jovial, it can be appealing. It can also be truculent The "Say!" which at this juncture smote upon Archie's ear-drum with a suddenness which made him leap in the air was truculent; and the two loafers and twenty-seven children who now formed the audience were well satisfied with the dramatic development of the performance. To their experienced ears the word had the right ring.

Archie spun round. At his elbow stood a long, strongly-built young man in a grey suit.

"Well!" said the young man, nastily. And he extended a large, freckled face toward Archie's. It seemed to the latter, as he backed against the wall, that the young man's neck must be composed of india-rubber. It appeared to be growing longer every moment. His face, besides being freckled, was a dull brick-red in colour; his lips curled back in an unpleasant snarl, showing a gold tooth; and beside him, swaying in an ominous sort of way, hung two clenched red hands about the size of two young legs of mutton. Archie eyed him with a growing apprehension. There are moments in life when, passing idly on our way, we see a strange face, look into strange eyes, and with a sudden glow of human warmth say to ourselves, "We have found a friend!" This was not one of those moments. The only person Archie had ever seen in his life who looked

less friendly was the sergeant-major who had trained him in the early days of the war, before he had got his commission.

"I've had my eye on you!" said the young man.

He still had his eye on him. It was a hot, gimlet-like eye, and it pierced the recesses of Archie's soul. He backed a little farther against the wall.

Archie was frankly disturbed. He was no poltroon, and had proved the fact on many occasions during the days when the entire German army seemed to be picking on him personally, but he hated and shrank from anything in the nature of a bally public scene.

"What," enquired the young man, still bearing the burden of the conversation, and shifting his left hand a little farther behind his back, "do you mean by following this young lady?"

Archie was glad he had asked him. This was precisely what he wanted to explain.

"My dear old lad--" he began.

In spite of the fact that he had asked a question and presumably desired a reply, the sound of Archie's voice seemed to be more than the young man could endure. It deprived him of the last vestige of restraint. With

a rasping snarl he brought his left fist round in a sweeping semicircle in the direction of Archie's head.

Archie was no novice in the art of self-defence. Since his early days at school he had learned much from leather-faced professors of the science. He had been watching this unpleasant young man's eyes with close attention, and the latter could not have indicated his scheme of action more clearly if he had sent him a formal note. Archie saw the swing all the way. He stepped nimbly aside, and the fist crashed against the wall. The young man fell back with a yelp of anguish.

"Gus!" screamed the Girl Friend, bounding forward.

She flung her arms round the injured man, who was ruefully examining a hand which, always of an out-size, was now swelling to still further dimensions.

"Gus, darling!"

A sudden chill gripped Archie. So engrossed had he been with his mission that it had never occurred to him that the love-lorn pitcher might have taken it into his head to follow the girl as well in the hope of putting in a word for himself. Yet such apparently had been the case. Well, this had definitely torn it. Two loving hearts were united again in complete reconciliation, but a fat lot of good that was. It would be days before the misguided Looney Biddle would be able to pitch with a hand like

that. It looked like a ham already, and was still swelling. Probably the wrist was sprained. For at least a week the greatest left-handed pitcher of his time would be about as much use to the Giants in any professional capacity as a cold in the head. And on that crippled hand depended the fate of all the money Archie had in the world. He wished now that he had not thwarted the fellow's simple enthusiasm. To have had his head knocked forcibly through a brick wall would not have been pleasant, but the ultimate outcome would not have been as unpleasant as this. With a heavy heart Archie prepared to withdraw, to be alone with his sorrow.

At this moment, however, the Girl Friend, releasing her wounded lover, made a sudden dash for him, with the plainest intention of blotting him from the earth.

"No, I say! Really!" said Archie, bounding backwards. "I mean to say!"

In a series of events, all of which had been a bit thick, this, in his opinion, achieved the maximum of thickness. It was the extreme ragged, outside edge of the limit. To brawl with a fellow-man in a public street had been bad, but to be brawled with by a girl--the shot was not on the board. Absolutely not on the board. There was only one thing to be done. It was dashed undignified, no doubt, for a fellow to pick up the old waukeesis and leg it in the face of the enemy, but there was no other course. Archie started to run; and, as he did so, one of the loafers made the mistake of gripping him by the collar of his coat.

"I got him!" observed the loafer.-There is a time for all things. This was essentially not the time for anyone of the male sex to grip the collar of Archie's coat. If a syndicate of Dempsey, Carpentier, and one of the Zoo gorillas had endeavoured to stay his progress at that moment, they would have had reason to consider it a rash move. Archie wanted to be elsewhere, and the blood of generations of Moffams, many of whom had swung a wicked axe in the free-for-all mix-ups of the Middle Ages, boiled within him at any attempt to revise his plans. There was a good deal of the loafer, but it was all soft. Releasing his hold when Archie's heel took him shrewdly on the shin, he received a nasty punch in what would have been the middle of his waistcoat if he had worn one, uttered a gurgling bleat like a wounded sheep, and collapsed against the wall. Archie, with a torn coat, rounded the corner, and sprinted down Ninth Avenue.

The suddenness of the move gave him an initial advantage. He was halfway down the first block before the vanguard of the pursuit poured out of the side street. Continuing to travel well, he skimmed past a large dray which had pulled up across the road, and moved on. The noise of those who pursued was loud and clamorous in the rear, but the dray hid him momentarily from their sight, and it was this fact which led Archie, the old campaigner, to take his next step.

It was perfectly obvious--he was aware of this even in the novel excitement of the chase--that a chappie couldn't hoof it at twenty-five miles an hour indefinitely along a main thoroughfare of a great city

without exciting remark. He must take cover. Cover! That was the wheeze. He looked about him for cover.

"You want a nice suit?"

It takes a great deal to startle your commercial New Yorker. The small tailor, standing in his doorway, seemed in no way surprised at the spectacle of Archie, whom he had seen pass at a conventional walk some five minutes before, returning like this at top speed. He assumed that Archie had suddenly remembered that he wanted to buy something.

This was exactly what Archie had done. More than anything else in the world, what he wanted to do now was to get into that shop and have a long talk about gents' clothing. Pulling himself up abruptly, he shot past the small tailor into the dim interior. A confused aroma of cheap clothing greeted him. Except for a small oasis behind a grubby counter, practically all the available space was occupied by suits. Stiff suits, looking like the body when discovered by the police, hung from hooks. Limp suits, with the appearance of having swooned from exhaustion, lay about on chairs and boxes. The place was a cloth morgue, a Sargasso Sea of serge.

Archie would not have had it otherwise. In these quiet groves of clothing a regiment could have lain hid.

"Something nifty in tweeds?" enquired the business-like proprietor of

this haven, following him amiably into the shop, "Or, maybe, yes, a nice serge? Say, mister, I got a sweet thing in blue serge that'll fit you like the paper on the wall!"

Archie wanted to talk about clothes, but not yet.

"I say, laddie," he said, hurriedly. "Lend me, your ear for half a jiffy!" Outside the baying of the pack had become imminent. "Stow me away for a moment in the undergrowth, and I'll buy anything you want."

He withdrew into the jungle. The noise outside grew in volume. The pursuit had been delayed for a priceless few instants by the arrival of another dray, moving northwards, which had drawn level with the first dray and dexterously bottled up the fairway. This obstacle had now been overcome, and the original searchers, their ranks swelled by a few dozen more of the leisured classes, were hot on the trail again.

"You done a murder?" enquired the voice of the proprietor, mildly interested, filtering through a wall of cloth. "Well, boys will be boys!" he said, philosophically. "See anything there that you like? There some sweet things there!"

"I'm inspecting them narrowly," replied Archie. "If you don't let those chappies find me, I shouldn't be surprised if I bought one."

"One?" said the proprietor, with a touch of austerity.

"Two," said Archie, quickly. "Or possibly three or six."

The proprietor's cordiality returned.

"You can't have too many nice suits," he said, approvingly, "not a young feller like you that wants to look nice. All the nice girls like a young feller that dresses nice. When you go out of here in a suit I got hanging up there at the back, the girls 'll be all over you like flies round a honey-pot."

"Would you mind," said Archie, "would you mind, as a personal favour to me, old companion, not mentioning that word 'girls'?"

He broke off. A heavy foot had crossed the threshold of the shop.

"Say, uncle," said a deep voice, one of those beastly voices that only the most poisonous blighters have, "you seen a young feller run past here?"

"Young feller?" The proprietor appeared to reflect. "Do you mean a young feller in blue, with a Homburg hat?"

"That's the duck! We lost him. Where did he go?"

"Him! Why, he come running past, quick as he could go. I wondered what

he was running for, a hot day like this. He went round the corner at the bottom of the block."

There was a silence.

"Well, I guess he's got away," said the voice, regretfully.

"The way he was travelling," agreed the proprietor, "I wouldn't be surprised if he was in Europe by this. You want a nice suit?"

The other, curtly expressing a wish that the proprietor would go to eternal perdition and take his entire stock with him, stumped out.

"This," said the proprietor, tranquilly, burrowing his way to where Archie stood and exhibiting a saffron-coloured outrage, which appeared to be a poor relation of the flannel family, "would put you back fifty dollars. And cheap!"

"Fifty dollars!"

"Sixty, I said. I don't speak always distinct."

Archie regarded the distressing garment with a shuddering horror. A young man with an educated taste in clothes, it got right in among his nerve centres.

"But, honestly, old soul, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but that isn't a suit, it's just a regrettable incident!"

The proprietor turned to the door in a listening attitude.

"I believe I hear that feller coming back," he said.

Archie gulped.

"How about trying it on?" he said. "I'm not sure, after all, it isn't fairly ripe."

"That's the way to talk," said the proprietor, cordially. "You try it on. You can't judge a suit, not a real nice suit like this, by looking at it. You want to put it on. There!" He led the way to a dusty mirror at the back of the shop. "Isn't that a bargain at seventy dollars?...Why, say, your mother would be proud if she could see her boy now!"

A quarter of an hour later, the proprietor, lovingly kneading a little sheaf of currency bills, eyed with a fond look the heap of clothes which lay on the counter.

"As nice a little lot as I've ever had in my shop!" Archie did not deny this. It was, he thought, probably only too true.

"I only wish I could see you walking up Fifth Avenue in them!"
rhapsodised the proprietor. "You'll give 'em a treat! What you going
to do with 'em? Carry 'em under your arm?" Archie shuddered strongly.
"Well, then, I can send 'em for you anywhere you like. It's all the same
to me. Where'll I send 'em?"

Archie meditated. The future was black enough as it was. He shrank from
the prospect of being confronted next day, at the height of his misery,
with these appalling reach-me-downs.

An idea struck him.

"Yes, send 'em," he said.

"What's the name and address?"

"Daniel Brewster," said Archie, "Hotel Cosmopolis."

It was a long time since he had given his father-in-law a present.

Archie went out into the street, and began to walk pensively down a now
peaceful Ninth Avenue. Out of the depths that covered him, black as the
pit from pole to pole, no single ray of hope came to cheer him. He could
not, like the poet, thank whatever gods there be for his unconquerable
soul, for his soul was licked to a splinter. He felt alone and
friendless in a rotten world. With the best intentions, he had succeeded

only in landing himself squarely amongst the ribstons. Why had he not been content with his wealth, instead of risking it on that blighted bet with Reggie? Why had he trailed the Girl Friend, dash her! He might have known that he would only make an ass of himself, And, because he had done so, Looney Biddle's left hand, that priceless left hand before which opposing batters quailed and wilted, was out of action, resting in a sling, careened like a damaged battleship; and any chance the Giants might have had of beating the Pirates was gone--gone--as surely as that thousand dollars which should have bought a birthday present for Lucille.

A birthday present for Lucille! He groaned in bitterness of spirit. She would be coming back to-night, dear girl, all smiles and happiness, wondering what he was going to give her tomorrow. And when to-morrow dawned, all he would be able to give her would be a kind smile. A nice state of things! A jolly situation! A thoroughly good egg, he did NOT think!

It seemed to Archie that Nature, contrary to her usual custom of indifference to human suffering, was mourning with him. The sky was overcast, and the sun had ceased to shine. There was a sort of sombreness in the afternoon, which fitted in with his mood. And then something splashed on his face.

It says much for Archie's pre-occupation that his first thought, as, after a few scattered drops, as though the clouds were submitting

samples for approval, the whole sky suddenly began to stream like a shower-bath, was that this was simply an additional infliction which he was called upon to bear, On top of all his other troubles he would get soaked to the skin or have to hang about in some doorway. He cursed richly, and sped for shelter.

The rain was setting about its work in earnest. The world was full of that rending, swishing sound which accompanies the more violent summer storms. Thunder crashed, and lightning flicked out of the grey heavens. Out in the street the raindrops bounded up off the stones like fairy fountains. Archie surveyed them morosely from his refuge in the entrance of a shop.

And then, suddenly, like one of those flashes which were lighting up the gloomy sky, a thought lit up his mind.

"By Jove! If this keeps up, there won't be a ball-game to-day!"

With trembling fingers he pulled out his watch. The hands pointed to five minutes to three. A blessed vision came to him of a moist and disappointed crowd receiving rain-checks up at the Polo Grounds.

"Switch it on, you blighters!" he cried, addressing the leaden clouds.

"Switch it on more and more!"

It was shortly before five o'clock that a young man bounded into a

jeweller's shop near the Hotel Cosmopolis--a young man who, in spite of the fact that his coat was torn near the collar and that he oozed water from every inch of his drenched clothes, appeared in the highest spirits.. It was only when he spoke that the jeweller recognised in the human sponge the immaculate youth who had looked in that morning to order a bracelet.

"I say, old lad," said this young man, "you remember that jolly little what-not you showed me before lunch?"

"The bracelet, sir?"

"As you observe with a manly candour which does you credit, my dear old jeweller, the bracelet. Well, produce, exhibit, and bring it forth, would you mind? Trot it out! Slip it across on a lordly dish!"

"You wished me, surely, to put it aside and send it to the Cosmopolis to-morrow?"

The young man tapped the jeweller earnestly on his substantial chest.

"What I wished and what I wish now are two bally separate and dashed distinct things, friend of my college days! Never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day, and all that! I'm not taking any more chances. Not for me! For others, yes, but not for Archibald! Here are the doubloons, produce the jolly bracelet Thanks!"

The jeweller counted the notes with the same unctiousness which Archie had observed earlier in the day in the proprietor of the second-hand clothes-shop. The process made him genial.

"A nasty, wet day, sir, it's been," he observed, chattily.

Archie shook his head.

"Old friend," he said, "you're all wrong. Far otherwise, and not a bit like it, my dear old trafficker in gems! You've put your finger on the one aspect of this blighted p.m. that really deserves credit and respect. Rarely in the experience of a lifetime have I encountered a day so absolutely bally in nearly every shape and form, but there was one thing that saved it, and that was its merry old wetness! Toodle-oo, laddie!"

"Good evening, sir," said the jeweller.