

CHAPTER XXI. THE GROWING BOY

The lobby of the Cosmopolis Hotel was a favourite stamping-ground of Mr. Daniel Brewster, its proprietor. He liked to wander about there, keeping a paternal eye on things, rather in the manner of the Jolly Innkeeper (hereinafter to be referred to as Mine Host) of the old-fashioned novel. Customers who, hurrying in to dinner, tripped over Mr. Brewster, were apt to mistake him for the hotel detective--for his eye was keen and his aspect a trifle austere--but, nevertheless, he was being as jolly an innkeeper as he knew how. His presence in the lobby supplied a personal touch to the Cosmopolis which other New York hotels lacked, and it undeniably made the girl at the book-stall extraordinarily civil to her clients, which was all to the good.

Most of the time Mr. Brewster stood in one spot and just looked thoughtful; but now and again he would wander to the marble slab behind which he kept the desk-clerk and run his eye over the register, to see who had booked rooms--like a child examining the stocking on Christmas morning to ascertain what Santa Claus had brought him.

As a rule, Mr. Brewster concluded this performance by shoving the book back across the marble slab and resuming his meditations. But one night a week or two after the Sausage Chappie's sudden restoration to the normal, he varied this procedure by starting rather violently, turning purple, and uttering an exclamation which was manifestly an exclamation

of chagrin. He turned abruptly and cannoned into Archie, who, in company with Lucille, happened to be crossing the lobby at the moment on his way to dine in their suite.

Mr. Brewster apologised gruffly; then, recognising his victim, seemed to regret having done so.

"Oh, it's you! Why can't you look where you're going?" he demanded. He had suffered much from his son-in-law.

"Frightfully sorry," said Archie, amiably. "Never thought you were going to fox-trot backwards all over the fairway."

"You mustn't bully Archie," said Lucille, severely, attaching herself to her father's back hair and giving it a punitive tug, "because he's an angel, and I love him, and you must learn to love him, too."

"Give you lessons at a reasonable rate," murmured Archie.

Mr. Brewster regarded his young relative with a lowering eye.

"What's the matter, father darling?" asked Lucille. "You seem upset"

"I am upset!" Mr. Brewster snorted. "Some people have got a nerve!" He glowered forbiddingly at an inoffensive young man in a light overcoat who had just entered, and the young man, though his conscience was quite

clear and Mr. Brewster an entire stranger to him, stopped dead, blushed, and went out again--to dine elsewhere. "Some people have got the nerve of an army mule!"

"Why, what's happened?"

"Those darned McCalls have registered here!"

"No!"

"Bit beyond me, this," said Archie, insinuating himself into the conversation. "Deep waters and what not! Who are the McCalls?"

"Some people father dislikes," said Lucille. "And they've chosen his hotel to stop at. But, father dear, you mustn't mind. It's really a compliment. They've come because they know it's the best hotel in New York."

"Absolutely!" said Archie. "Good accommodation for man and beast! All the comforts of home! Look on the bright side, old bean. No good getting the wind up. Cherrio, old companion!"

"Don't call me old companion!"

"Eh, what? Oh, right-o!"

Lucille steered her husband out of the danger zone, and they entered the lift.

"Poor father!" she said, as they went to their suite, "it's a shame. They must have done it to annoy him. This man McCall has a place next to some property father bought in Westchester, and he's bringing a law-suit against father about a bit of land which he claims belongs to him. He might have had the tact to go to another hotel. But, after all, I don't suppose it was the poor little fellow's fault. He does whatever his wife tells him to."

"We all do that," said Archie the married man.

Lucille eyed him fondly.

"Isn't it a shame, precious, that all husbands haven't nice wives like me?"

"When I think of you, by Jove," said Archie, fervently, "I want to babble, absolutely babble!"

"Oh, I was telling you about the McCalls. Mr. McCall is one of those little, meek men, and his wife's one of those big, bullying women. It was she who started all the trouble with father. Father and Mr. McCall were very fond of each other till she made him begin the suit. I feel sure she made him come to this hotel just to annoy father. Still,

they've probably taken the most expensive suite in the place, which is something."

Archie was at the telephone. His mood was now one of quiet peace. Of all the happenings which went to make up existence in New York, he liked best the cosy tete-a-tete dinners with Lucille in their suite, which, owing to their engagements--for Lucille was a popular girl, with many friends--occurred all too seldom.

"Touching now the question of browsing and sluicing," he said. "I'll be getting them to send along a waiter."

"Oh, good gracious!"

"What's the matter?"

"I've just remembered. I promised faithfully I would go and see Jane Murchison to-day. And I clean forgot. I must rush."

"But light of my soul, we are about to eat. Pop around and see her after dinner."

"I can't. She's going to a theatre to-night."

"Give her the jolly old miss-in-baulk, then, for the nonce, and spring round to-morrow."

"She's sailing for England to-morrow morning, early. No, I must go and see her now. What a shame! She's sure to make me stop to dinner, I tell you what. Order something for me, and, if I'm not back in half an hour, start."

"Jane Murchison," said Archie, "is a bally nuisance."

"Yes. But I've known her since she was eight."

"If her parents had had any proper feeling," said Archie, "they would have drowned her long before that."

He unhooked the receiver, and asked despondently to be connected with Room Service. He thought bitterly of the exigent Jane, whom he recollected dimly as a tall female with teeth. He half thought of going down to the grill-room on the chance of finding a friend there, but the waiter was on his way to the room. He decided that he might as well stay where he was.

The waiter arrived, booked the order, and departed. Archie had just completed his toilet after a shower-bath when a musical clinking without announced the advent of the meal. He opened the door. The waiter was there with a table congested with things under covers, from which escaped a savoury and appetising odour. In spite of his depression, Archie's soul perked up a trifle.

Suddenly he became aware that he was not the only person present who was deriving enjoyment from the scent of the meal. Standing beside the waiter and gazing wistfully at the foodstuffs was a long, thin boy of about sixteen. He was one of those boys who seem all legs and knuckles. He had pale red hair, sandy eyelashes, and a long neck; and his eyes, as he removed them from the-table and raised them to Archie's, had a hungry look. He reminded Archie of a half-grown, half-starved hound.

"That smells good!" said the long boy. He inhaled deeply. "Yes, sir," he continued, as one whose mind is definitely made up, "that smells good!"

Before Archie could reply, the telephone bell rang. It was Lucille, confirming her prophecy that the pest Jane would insist on her staying to dine.

"Jane," said Archie, into the telephone, "is a pot of poison. The waiter is here now, setting out a rich banquet, and I shall have to eat two of everything by myself."

He hung up the receiver, and, turning, met the pale eye of the long boy, who had propped himself up in the doorway.

"Were you expecting somebody to dinner?" asked the boy.

"Why, yes, old friend, I was."

"I wish--"

"Yes?"

"Oh, nothing."

The waiter left. The long boy hitched his back more firmly against the doorpost, and returned to his original theme.

"That surely does smell good!" He basked a moment in the aroma. "Yes, sir! I'll tell the world it does!"

Archie was not an abnormally rapid thinker, but he began at this point to get a clearly defined impression that this lad, if invited, would waive the formalities and consent to join his meal. Indeed, the idea Archie got was that, if he were not invited pretty soon, he would invite himself.

"Yes," he agreed. "It doesn't smell bad, what!"

"It smells GOOD!" said the boy. "Oh, doesn't it! Wake me up in the night and ask me if it doesn't!"

"Poulet en casserole," said Archie.

"Golly!" said the boy, reverently.

There was a pause. The situation began to seem to Archie a trifle difficult. He wanted to start his meal, but it began to appear that he must either do so under the penetrating gaze of his new friend or else eject the latter forcibly. The boy showed no signs of ever wanting to leave the doorway.

"You've dined, I suppose, what?" said Archie.

"I never dine."

"What!"

"Not really dine, I mean. I only get vegetables and nuts and things."

"Dieting?"

"Mother is."

"I don't absolutely catch the drift, old bean," said Archie. The boy sniffed with half-closed eyes as a wave of perfume from the poulet en casserole floated past him. He seemed to be anxious to intercept as much of it as possible before it got through the door.

"Mother's a food-reformer," he vouchsafed. "She lectures on it. She

makes Pop and me live on vegetables and nuts and things."

Archie was shocked. It was like listening to a tale from the abyss.

"My dear old chap, you must suffer agonies--absolute shooting pains!"

He had no hesitation now. Common humanity pointed out his course. "Would you care to join me in a bite now?"

"Would I!" The boy smiled a wan smile. "Would I! Just stop me on the street and ask me!"

"Come on in, then," said Archie, rightly taking this peculiar phrase for a formal acceptance. "And close the door. The fatted calf is getting cold."

Archie was not a man with a wide visiting-list among people with families, and it was so long since he had seen a growing boy in action at the table that he had forgotten what sixteen is capable of doing with a knife and fork, when it really squares its elbows, takes a deep breath, and gets going. The spectacle which he witnessed was consequently at first a little unnerving. The long boy's idea of trifling with a meal appeared to be to swallow it whole and reach out for more. He ate like a starving Eskimo. Archie, in the time he had spent in the trenches making the world safe for the working-man to strike in, had occasionally been quite peckish, but he sat dazed before this majestic hunger. This was real eating.

There was little conversation. The growing boy evidently did not believe in table-talk when he could use his mouth for more practical purposes. It was not until the final roll had been devoured to its last crumb that the guest found leisure to address his host. Then he leaned back with a contented sigh.

"Mother," said the human python, "says you ought to chew every mouthful thirty-three times...."

"Yes, sir! Thirty-three times!" He sighed again, "I haven't ever had meal like that."

"All right, was it, what?"

"Was it! Was it! Call me up on the 'phone and ask me!-Yes, sir!-Mother's tipped off these darned waiters not to serve-me anything but vegetables and nuts and things, darn it!"

"The mater seems to have drastic ideas about the good old feed-bag, what!"

"I'll say she has! Pop hates it as much as me, but he's scared to kick. Mother says vegetables contain all the proteins you want. Mother says, if you eat meat, your blood-pressure goes all blooey. Do you think it does?"

"Mine seems pretty well in the pink."

"She's great on talking," conceded the boy. "She's out to-night somewhere, giving a lecture on Rational Eating to some ginks. I'll have to be slipping up to our suite before she gets back." He rose, sluggishly. "That isn't a bit of roll under that napkin, is it?" he asked, anxiously.

Archie raised the napkin.

"No. Nothing of that species."

"Oh, well!" said the boy, resignedly. "Then I believe I'll be going. Thanks very much for the dinner."

"Not a bit, old top. Come again if you're ever trickling round in this direction."

The long boy removed himself slowly, loath to leave. At the door he cast an affectionate glance back at the table.

"Some meal!" he said, devoutly. "Considerable meal!"

Archie lit a cigarette. He felt like a Boy Scout who has done his day's Act of Kindness.

On the following morning it chanced that Archie needed a fresh supply of tobacco. It was his custom, when this happened, to repair to a small shop on Sixth Avenue which he had discovered accidentally in the course of his rambles about the great city. His relations with Jno. Blake, the proprietor, were friendly and intimate. The discovery that Mr. Blake was English and had, indeed, until a few years back maintained an establishment only a dozen doors or so from Archie's London club, had served as a bond.

To-day he found Mr. Blake in a depressed mood. The tobacconist was a hearty, red-faced man, who looked like an English sporting publican--the kind of man who wears a fawn-coloured top-coat and drives to the Derby in a dog-cart; and usually there seemed to be nothing on his mind except the vagaries of the weather, concerning which he was a great conversationalist. But now moodiness had claimed him for its own. After a short and melancholy "Good morning," he turned to the task of measuring out the tobacco in silence.

Archie's sympathetic nature was perturbed.--"What's the matter, laddie?" he enquired. "You would seem to be feeling a bit of an onion this bright morning, what, yes, no? I can see it with the naked eye."

Mr. Blake grunted sorrowfully.

"I've had a knock, Mr. Moffam."

"Tell me all, friend of my youth."

Mr. Blake, with a jerk of his thumb, indicated a poster which hung on the wall behind the counter. Archie had noticed it as he came in, for it was designed to attract the eye. It was printed in black letters on a yellow ground, and ran as follows:

CLOVER-LEAF SOCIAL AND OUTING CLUB

GRAND CONTEST

PIE-EATING CHAMPIONSHIP OF THE WEST SIDE

SPIKE O'DOWD

(Champion)

v.

BLAKE'S UNKNOWN

FOR A PURSE OF \$50 AND SIDE-BET

Archie examined this document gravely. It conveyed nothing to him except--what he had long suspected--that his sporting-looking friend had sporting blood as well as that kind of exterior. He expressed a kindly

hope that the other's Unknown would bring home the bacon.

Mr. Blake laughed one of those hollow, mirthless laughs.

"There ain't any blooming Unknown," he said, bitterly. This man had plainly suffered. "Yesterday, yes, but not now."

Archie sighed.

"In the midst of life--Dead?" he enquired, delicately.

"As good as," replied the stricken tobacconist. He cast aside his artificial restraint and became voluble. Archie was one of those sympathetic souls in whom even strangers readily confided their most intimate troubles. He was to those in travail of spirit very much what catnip is to a cat. "It's 'ard, sir, it's blooming 'ard! I'd got the event all sewed up in a parcel, and now this young feller-me-lad 'as to give me the knock. This lad of mine--sort of cousin 'e is; comes from London, like you and me--'as always 'ad, ever since he landed in this country, a most amazing knack of stowing away grub. 'E'd been a bit underfed these last two or three years over in the old country, what with food restrictions and all, and 'e took to the food over 'ere amazing. I'd 'ave backed 'im against a ruddy orstridge! Orstridge! I'd 'ave backed 'im against 'arff a dozen orstridges--take 'em on one after the other in the same ring on the same evening--and given 'em a handicap, too! 'E was a jewel, that boy. I've seen him polish off four

pounds of steak and mealy potatoes and then look round kind of wolfish, as much as to ask when dinner was going to begin! That's the kind of a lad 'e was till this very morning. 'E would have out-swallowed this 'ere O'Dowd without turning a hair, as a relish before 'is tea! I'd got a couple of 'undred dollars on 'im, and thought myself lucky to get the odds. And now--"

Mr. Blake relapsed into a tortured silence.

"But what's the matter with the blighter? Why can't he go over the top? Has he got indigestion?"

"Indigestion?" Mr. Blaife laughed another of his hollow laughs. "You couldn't give that boy indigestion if you fed 'im in on safety-razor blades. Religion's more like what 'e's got."

"Religion?"

"Well, you can call it that. Seems last night, instead of goin' and resting 'is mind at a picture-palace like I told him to, 'e sneaked off to some sort of a lecture down on Eighth Avenue. 'E said 'e'd seen a piece about it in the papers, and it was about Rational Eating, and that kind of attracted 'im. 'E sort of thought 'e might pick up a few hints, like. 'E didn't know what rational eating was, but it sounded to 'im as if it must be something to do with food, and 'e didn't want to miss it. 'E came in here just now," said Mr. Blake, dully, "and 'e was a changed

lad! Scared to death 'e was! Said the way 'e'd been goin' on in the past, it was a wonder 'e'd got any stummick left! It was a lady that give the lecture, and this boy said it was amazing what she told 'em about blood-pressure and things 'e didn't even know 'e 'ad. She showed 'em pictures, coloured pictures, of what 'appens inside the injudicious eater's stummick who doesn't chew his food, and it was like a battlefield! 'E said 'e would no more think of eatin' a lot of pie than 'e would of shootin' 'imself, and anyhow eating pie would be a quicker death. I reasoned with 'im, Mr. Moffam, with tears in my eyes. I asked 'im was he goin' to chuck away fame and wealth just because a woman who didn't know what she was talking about had shown him a lot of faked pictures. But there wasn't any doin' anything with him. 'E give me the knock and 'opped it down the street to buy nuts." Mr. Blake moaned. "Two 'undred dollars and more gone pop, not to talk of the fifty dollars 'e would have won and me to get twenty-five of!"

Archie took his tobacco and walked pensively back to the hotel. He was fond of Jno. Blake, and grieved for the trouble that had come upon him. It was odd, he felt, how things seemed to link themselves up together. The woman who had delivered the fateful lecture to injudicious eaters could not be other than the mother of his young guest of last night. An uncomfortable woman! Not content with starving her own family--Archie stopped in his tracks. A pedestrian, walking behind him, charged into his back, but Archie paid no attention. He had had one of those sudden, luminous ideas, which help a man who does not do much thinking as a rule to restore his average. He stood there for a moment, almost dizzy at the

brilliance of his thoughts; then hurried on. Napoleon, he mused as he walked, must have felt rather like this after thinking up a hot one to spring on the enemy.

As if Destiny were suiting her plans to his, one of the first persons he saw as he entered the lobby of the Cosmopolis was the long boy. He was standing at the bookstall, reading as much of a morning paper as could be read free under the vigilant eyes of the presiding girl. Both he and she were observing the unwritten rules which govern these affairs--to wit, that you may read without interference as much as can be read without touching the paper. If you touch the paper, you lose, and have to buy.

"Well, well, well!" said Archie. "Here we are again, what!" He prodded the boy amiably in the lower ribs. "You're just the chap I was looking for. Got anything on for the time being?"

The boy said he had no engagements.

"Then I want you to stagger round with me to a chappie I know on Sixth Avenue. It's only a couple of blocks away. I think I can do you a bit of good. Put you on to something tolerably ripe, if you know what I mean. Trickle along, laddie. You don't need a hat."

They found Mr. Blake brooding over his troubles in an empty shop.

"Cheer up, old thing!" said Archie. "The relief expedition has arrived."
He directed his companion's gaze to the poster. "Cast your eye over that. How does that strike you?"

The long boy scanned the poster. A gleam appeared in his rather dull eye.

"Well?"

"Some people have all the luck!" said the long boy, feelingly.

"Would you like to compete, what?"

The boy smiled a sad smile.

"Would I! Would I! Say!..."

"I know," interrupted Archie. "Wake you up in the night and ask you! I knew I could rely on you, old thing." He turned to Mr. Blake. "Here's the fellow you've been wanting to meet. The finest left-and-right-hand eater east of the Rockies! He'll fight the good fight for you."

Mr. Blake's English training had not been wholly overcome by residence in New York. He still retained a nice eye for the distinctions of class.

"But this is young gentleman's a young gentleman," he urged, doubtfully,

yet with hope shining in his eye. "He wouldn't do it."

"Of course, he would. Don't be ridic, old thing."

"Wouldn't do what?" asked the boy.

"Why save the old homestead by taking on the champion. Dashed sad case, between ourselves! This poor egg's nominee has given him the raspberry at the eleventh hour, and only you can save him. And you owe it to him to do something you know, because it was your jolly old mater's lecture last night that made the nominee quit. You must charge in and take his place. Sort of poetic justice, don't you know, and what not!" He turned to Mr. Blake. "When is the conflict supposed to start? Two-thirty? You haven't any important engagement for two-thirty, have you?"

"No. Mother's lunching at some ladies' club, and giving a lecture afterwards. I can slip away."

Archie patted his head.

"Then leg it where glory waits you, old bean!"

The long boy was gazing earnestly at the poster. It seemed to fascinate him.

"Pie!" he said in a hushed voice.

The word was like a battle-cry.