

CHAPTER XXIII. MOTHER'S KNEE

Archie Moffam's connection with that devastatingly popular ballad, "Mother's Knee," was one to which he always looked back later with a certain pride. "Mother's Knee," it will be remembered, went through the world like a pestilence. Scots elders hummed it on their way to kirk; cannibals crooned it to their offspring in the jungles of Borneo; it was a best-seller among the Bolsheviks. In the United States alone three million copies were disposed of. For a man who has not accomplished anything outstandingly great in his life, it is something to have been in a sense responsible for a song like that; and, though there were moments when Archie experienced some of the emotions of a man who has punched a hole in the dam of one of the larger reservoirs, he never really regretted his share in the launching of the thing.

It seems almost bizarre now to think that there was a time when even one person in the world had not heard "Mother's Knee"; but it came fresh to Archie one afternoon some weeks after the episode of Washy, in his suite at the Hotel Cosmopolis, where he was cementing with cigarettes and pleasant conversation his renewed friendship with Wilson Hymack, whom he had first met in the neighbourhood of Armentieres during the war.

"What are you doing these days?" enquired Wilson Hymack.

"Me?" said Archie. "Well, as a matter of fact, there is what you might

call a sort of species of lull in my activities at the moment. But my jolly old father-in-law is bustling about, running up a new hotel a bit farther down-town, and the scheme is for me to be manager when it's finished. From what I have seen in this place, it's a simple sort of job, and I fancy I shall be somewhat hot stuff. How are you filling in the long hours?"

"I'm in my uncle's office, darn it!"

"Starting at the bottom and learning the business and all that? A noble pursuit, no doubt, but I'm bound to say it would give me the pip in no uncertain manner."

"It gives me," said Wilson Hymack, "a pain in the thorax. I want to be a composer."

"A composer, eh?"

Archie felt that he should have guessed this. The chappie had a distinctly artistic look. He wore a bow-tie and all that sort of thing. His trousers bagged at the knees, and his hair, which during the martial epoch of his career had been pruned to the roots, fell about his ears in luxuriant disarray.

"Say! Do you want to hear the best thing I've ever done?"

"Indubitably," said Archie, politely. "Carry on, old bird!"

"I wrote the lyric as well as the melody," said Wilson Hymack, who had already seated himself at the piano. "It's got the greatest title you ever heard. It's a lallapaloosa! It's called 'It's a Long Way Back to Mother's Knee.' How's that? Poor, eh?"

Archie expelled a smoke-ring doubtfully.

"Isn't it a little stale?"

"Stale? What do you mean, stale? There's always room for another song boosting Mother."

"Oh, is it boosting Mother?" Archie's face cleared. "I thought it was a hit at the short skirts. Why, of course, that makes all the difference. In that case, I see no reason why it should not be ripe, fruity, and pretty well all to the mustard. Let's have it."

Wilson Hymack pushed as much of his hair out of his eyes as he could reach with one hand, cleared his throat, looked dreamily over the top of the piano at a photograph of Archie's father-in-law, Mr. Daniel Brewster, played a prelude, and began to sing in a weak, high, composer's voice. All composers sing exactly alike, and they have to be heard to be believed.

"One night a young man wandered through the glitter of Broadway: His money he had squandered. For a meal he couldn't pay."

"Tough luck!" murmured Archie, sympathetically.

"He thought about the village where his boyhood he had spent, And yearned for all the simple joys with which he'd been content."

"The right spirit!" said Archie, with approval. "I'm beginning to like this chappie!"

"Don't interrupt!"

"Oh, right-o! Carried away and all that!"

"He looked upon the city, so frivolous and gay; And, as he heaved a weary sigh, these words he then did say:

It's a long way back to Mother's knee,

Mother's knee,

Mother's knee:

It's a long way back to Mother's knee,

Where I used to stand and prattle

With my teddy-bear and rattle:

Oh, those childhood days in Tennessee,

They sure look good to me!

It's a long, long way, but I'm gonna start to-day!

I'm going back,

Believe me, oh!

I'm going back

(I want to go!)

I'm going back--back--on the seven-three

To the dear old shack where I used to be!

I'm going back to Mother's knee!"

Wilson Hymack's voice cracked on the final high note, which was of an altitude beyond his powers. He turned with a modest cough.

"That'll give you an idea of it!"

"It has, old thing, it has!"

"Is it or is it not a ball of fire?"

"It has many of the earmarks of a sound egg," admitted Archie. "Of course--"

"Of course, it wants singing."

"Just what I was going to suggest."

"It wants a woman to sing it. A woman who could reach out for that last

high note and teach it to take a joke. The whole refrain is working up to that. You need Tetrzzini or someone who would just pick that note off the roof and hold it till the janitor came round to lock up the building for the night."

"I must buy a copy for my wife. Where can I get it?"

"You can't get it! It isn't published. Writing music's the darndest job!" Wilson Hymack snorted fiercely. It was plain that the man was pouring out the pent-up emotion of many days. "You write the biggest thing in years and you go round trying to get someone to sing it, and they say you're a genius and then shove the song away in a drawer and forget about it."

Archie lit another cigarette.

"I'm a jolly old child in these matters, old lad," he said, "but why don't you take it direct to a publisher? As a matter of fact, if it would be any use to you, I was foregathering with a music-publisher only the other day. A bird of the name of Blumenthal. He was lunching in here with a pal of mine, and we got tolerably matey. Why not let me tool you round to the office to-morrow and play it to him?"

"No, thanks. Much obliged, but I'm not going to play that melody in any publisher's office with his hired gang of Tin-Pan Alley composers listening at the keyhole and taking notes. I'll have to wait till I can

find somebody to sing it. Well, I must be going along. Glad to have seen you again. Sooner or later I'll take you to hear that high note sung by someone in a way that'll make your spine tie itself in knots round the back of your neck."

"I'll count the days," said Archie, courteously. "Pip-pip!"

Hardly had the door closed behind the composer when it opened again to admit Lucille.

"Hallo, light of my soul!" said Archie, rising and embracing his wife.

"Where have you been all the afternoon? I was expecting you this many an hour past. I wanted you to meet--"

"I've been having tea with a girl down in Greenwich Village. I couldn't get away before. Who was that who went out just as I came along the passage?"

"Chappie of the name of Hymack. I met him in France. A composer and what not."

"We seem to have been moving in artistic circles this afternoon. The girl I went to see is a singer. At least, she wants to sing, but gets no encouragement."

"Precisely the same with my bird. He wants to get his music sung but

nobody'll sing it. But I didn't know you knew any Greenwich Village warblers, sunshine of my home. How did you meet this female?"

Lucille sat down and gazed forlornly at him with her big grey eyes. She was registering something, but Archie could not gather what it was.

"Archie, darling, when you married me you undertook to share my sorrows, didn't you?"

"Absolutely! It's all in the book of words. For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, all-down-set-'em-up-in-the-other-alley. Regular iron-clad contract!"

"Then share 'em!" said Lucille. "Bill's in love again!"

Archie blinked.

"Bill? When you say Bill, do you mean Bill? Your brother Bill? My brother-in-law Bill? Jolly old William, the son and heir of the Brewsters?"

"I do."

"You say he's in love? Cupid's dart?"

"Even so!"

"But, I say! Isn't this rather--What I mean to say is, the lad's an absolute scourge! The Great Lover, what! Also ran, Brigham Young, and all that sort of thing! Why, it's only a few weeks ago that he was moaning brokenly about that vermilion-haired female who subsequently hooked on to old Reggie van Tuyl!"

"She's a little better than that girl, thank goodness. All the same, I don't think Father will approve."

"Of what calibre is the latest exhibit?"

"Well, she comes from the Middle West, and seems to be trying to be twice as Bohemian as the rest of the girls down in Greenwich Village. She wears her hair bobbed and goes about in a kimono. She's probably read magazine stories about Greenwich Village, and has modelled herself on them. It's so silly, when you can see Hicks Corners sticking out of her all the time."

"That one got past me before I could grab it. What did you say she had sticking out of her?"

"I meant that anybody could see that she came from somewhere out in the wilds. As a matter of fact, Bill tells me that she was brought up in Snake Bite, Michigan."

"Snake Bite? What rummy names you have in America! Still, I'll admit there's a village in England called Nether Wallop, so who am I to cast the first stone? How is old Bill? Pretty feverish?"

"He says this time it is the real thing."

"That's what they all say! I wish I had a dollar for every time--Forgotten what I was going to say!" broke off Archie, prudently.

"So you think," he went on, after a pause, "that William's latest is going to be one more shock for the old dad?"

"I can't imagine Father approving of her."

"I've studied your merry old progenitor pretty closely," said Archie, "and, between you and me, I can't imagine him approving of anybody!"

"I can't understand why it is that Bill goes out of his way to pick these horrors. I know at least twenty delightful girls, all pretty and with lots of money, who would be just the thing for him; but he sneaks away and goes falling in love with someone impossible. And the worst of it is that one always feels one's got to do one's best to see him through."

"Absolutely! One doesn't want to throw a spanner into the works of Love's young dream. It behoves us to rally round. Have you heard this girl sing?"

"Yes. She sang this afternoon."

"What sort of a voice has she got?"

"Well, it's--loud!"

"Could she pick a high note off the roof and hold it till the janitor came round to lock up the building for the night?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Answer me this, woman, frankly. How is her high note? Pretty lofty?"

"Why, yes."

"Then say no more," said Archie. "Leave this to me, my dear old better four-fifths! Hand the whole thing over to Archibald, the man who never lets you down. I have a scheme!"

As Archie approached his suite on the following afternoon he heard through the closed door the drone of a gruff male voice; and, going in, discovered Lucille in the company of his brother-in-law. Lucille, Archie thought, was looking a trifle fatigued. Bill, on the other hand, was in great shape. His eyes were shining, and his face looked so like that of a stuffed frog that Archie had no difficulty in gathering that he had

been lecturing on the subject of his latest enslaver.

"Hallo, Bill, old crumpet!" he said.

"Hallo, Archie!"

"I'm so glad you've come," said Lucille. "Bill is telling me all about Spectatia."

"Who?"

"Spectatia. The girl, you know. Her name is Spectatia Huskisson."

"It can't be!" said Archie, incredulously.

"Why not?" growled Bill.

"Well, how could it?" said Archie, appealing to him as a reasonable man.

"I mean to say! Spectatia Huskisson! I gravely doubt whether there is such a name."

"What's wrong with it?" demanded the incensed Bill. "It's a darned sight better name than Archibald Moffam."

"Don't fight, you two children!" intervened Lucille, firmly. "It's a good old Middle West name. Everybody knows the Huskissons of Snake Bite,

Michigan. Besides, Bill calls her Tootles."

"Pootles," corrected Bill, austerely.

"Oh, yes, Pootles. He calls her Pootles."

"Young blood! Young blood!" sighed Archie.

"I wish you wouldn't talk as if you were my grandfather."

"I look on you as a son, laddie, a favourite son!"

"If I had a father like you--!"-"Ah, but you haven't, young-feller-me-lad, and that's the trouble. If you had, everything would be simple. But as your actual father, if you'll allow me to say so, is one of the finest specimens of the human vampire-bat in captivity, something has got to be done about it, and you're dashed lucky to have me in your corner, a guide, philosopher, and friend, full of the fruitiest ideas. Now, if you'll kindly listen to me for a moment--"

"I've been listening to you ever since you came in."

"You wouldn't speak in that harsh tone of voice if you knew all!

William, I have a scheme!"

"Well?"

"The scheme to which I allude is what Maeterlinck would call a lallapaloosa!"

"What a little marvel he is!" said Lucille, regarding her husband affectionately. "He eats a lot of fish, Bill. That's what makes him so clever!"

"Shrimps!" diagnosed Bill, churlishly.

"Do you know the leader of the orchestra in the restaurant downstairs?" asked Archie, ignoring the slur.

"I know there IS a leader of the orchestra. What about him?"

"A sound fellow. Great pal of mine. I've forgotten his name--"

"Call him Pootles!" suggested Lucille.

"Desist!" said Archie, as a wordless growl proceeded from his stricken brother-in-law. "Temper your hilarity with a modicum of reserve. This girlish frivolity is unseemly. Well, I'm going to have a chat with this chappie and fix it all up."

"Fix what up?"

"The whole jolly business. I'm going to kill two birds with one stone. I've a composer chappie popping about in the background whose one ambition is to have his pet song sung before a discriminating audience. You have a singer straining at the leash. I'm going to arrange with this egg who leads the orchestra that your female shall sing my chappie's song downstairs one night during dinner. How about it? Is it or is it not a ball of fire?"

"It's not a bad idea," admitted Bill, brightening visibly. "I wouldn't have thought you had it in you."

"Why not?"

"Well--"

"It's a capital idea," said Lucille. "Quite out of the question, of course."

"How do you mean?"

"Don't you know that the one thing Father hates more than anything else in the world is anything like a cabaret? People are always coming to him, suggesting that it would brighten up the dinner hour if he had singers and things, and he crushes them into little bits. He thinks there's nothing that lowers the tone of a place more. He'll bite you in

three places when you suggest it to him!"

"Ah! But has it escaped your notice, lighting system of my soul, that the dear old dad is not at present in residence? He went off to fish at Lake What's-its-name this morning."

"You aren't dreaming of doing this without asking him?"

"That was the general idea."

"But he'll be furious when he finds out."

"But will he find out? I ask you, will he?"

"Of course he will."

"I don't see why he should," said Bill, on whose plastic mind the plan had made a deep impression.

"He won't," said Archie, confidently. "This wheeze is for one night only. By the time the jolly old guv'nor returns, bitten to the bone by mosquitoes, with one small stuffed trout in his suit-case, everything will be over and all quiet once more along the Potomac. The scheme is this. My chappie wants his song heard by a publisher. Your girl wants her voice heard by one of the blighters who get up concerts and all that sort of thing. No doubt you know such a bird, whom you could invite to

the hotel for a bit of dinner?"

"I know Carl Steinburg. As a matter of fact, I was thinking of writing to him about Spectatia."

"You're absolutely sure that IS her name?" said Archie, his voice still tinged with incredulity. "Oh, well, I suppose she told you so herself, and no doubt she knows best. That will be topping. Rope in your pal and hold him down at the table till the finish. Lucille, the beautiful vision on the sky-line yonder, and I will be at another table entertaining Maxie Blumenthal"

"Who on earth is Maxie Blumenthal?" asked Lucille.

"One of my boyhood chums. A music-publisher. I'll get him to come along, and then we'll all be set. At the conclusion of the performance Miss--" Archie winced--"Miss Spectatia Huskisson will be signed up for a forty weeks' tour, and jovial old Blumenthal will be making all arrangements for publishing the song. Two birds, as I indicated before, with one stone! How about it?"

"It's a winner," said Bill.

"Of course," said Archie, "I'm not urging you. I merely make the suggestion. If you know a better 'ole go to it!"

"It's terrific!" said Bill.

"It's absurd!" said Lucille.

"My dear old partner of joys and sorrows," said Archie, wounded, "we court criticism, but this is mere abuse. What seems to be the difficulty?"

"The leader of the orchestra would be afraid to do it."

"Ten dollars--supplied by William here--push it over, Bill, old man--will remove his tremors."

"And Father's certain to find out."

"Am I afraid of Father?" cried Archie, manfully. "Well, yes, I am!" he added, after a moment's reflection. "But I don't see how he can possibly get to know."

"Of course he can't," said Bill, decidedly. "Fix it up as soon as you can, Archie. This is what the doctor ordered."