

## CHAPTER XXV. THE WIGMORE VENUS

The morning was so brilliantly fine; the populace popped to and fro in so active and cheery a manner; and everybody appeared to be so absolutely in the pink, that a casual observer of the city of New York would have said that it was one of those happy days. Yet Archie Moffam, as he turned out of the sun-bathed street into the ramshackle building on the third floor of which was the studio belonging to his artist friend, James B. Wheeler, was faintly oppressed with a sort of a kind of feeling that something was wrong. He would not have gone so far as to say that he had the pip--it was more a vague sense of discomfort. And, searching for first causes as he made his way upstairs, he came to the conclusion that the person responsible for this nebulous depression was his wife, Lucille. It seemed to Archie that at breakfast that morning Lucille's manner had been subtly rummy. Nothing you could put your finger on, still--rummy.

Musing thus, he reached the studio, and found the door open and the room empty. It had the air of a room whose owner has dashed in to fetch his golf-clubs and biffed off, after the casual fashion of the artist temperament, without bothering to close up behind him. And such, indeed, was the case. The studio had seen the last of J. B. Wheeler for that day: but Archie, not realising this and feeling that a chat with Mr. Wheeler, who was a light-hearted bird, was what he needed this morning, sat down to wait. After a few moments, his gaze, straying over the room,

encountered a handsomely framed picture, and he went across to take a look at it.

J. B. Wheeler was an artist who made a large annual income as an illustrator for the magazines, and it was a surprise to Archie to find that he also went in for this kind of thing. For the picture, dashingly painted in oils, represented a comfortably plump young woman who, from her rather weak-minded simper and the fact that she wore absolutely nothing except a small dove on her left shoulder, was plainly intended to be the goddess Venus. Archie was not much of a lad around the picture-galleries, but he knew enough about Art to recognise Venus when he saw her; though once or twice, it is true, artists had double-crossed him by ringing in some such title as "Day Dreams," or "When the Heart is Young."

He inspected this picture for awhile, then, returning to his seat, lit a cigarette and began to meditate on Lucille once more. "Yes, the dear girl had been rummy at breakfast. She had not exactly said anything or done anything out of the ordinary; but--well, you know how it is. We husbands, we lads of the for-better-or-for-worse brigade, we learn to pierce the mask. There had been in Lucille's manner that curious, strained sweetness which comes to women whose husbands have failed to match the piece of silk or forgotten to post an important letter. If his conscience had not been as clear as crystal, Archie would have said that that was what must have been the matter. But, when Lucille wrote letters, she just stepped out of the suite and dropped them in the

mail-chute attached to the elevator. It couldn't be that. And he couldn't have forgotten anything else, because--"

"Oh my sainted aunt!"

Archie's cigarette smouldered, neglected, between his fingers. His jaw had fallen and his eyes were staring glassily before him. He was appalled. His memory was weak, he knew; but never before had it let him down, so scurvily as this. This was a record. It stood in a class by itself, printed in red ink and marked with a star, as the bloomer of a lifetime. For a man may forget many things: he may forget his name, his umbrella, his nationality, his spats, and the friends of his youth: but there is one thing which your married man, your in-sickness-and-in-health lizard must not forget: and that is the anniversary of his wedding-day.

Remorse swept over Archie like a wave. His heart bled for Lucille. No wonder the poor girl had been rummy at breakfast. What girl wouldn't be rummy at breakfast, tied for life to a ghastly outsider like himself? He groaned hollowly, and sagged forlornly in his chair: and, as he did so, the Venus caught his eye. For it was an eye-catching picture. You might like it or dislike it, but you could not ignore it.

As a strong swimmer shoots to the surface after a high dive, Archie's soul rose suddenly from the depths to which it had descended. He did not often get inspirations, but he got one now. Hope dawned with a jerk. The

one way out had presented itself to him. A rich present! That was the wheeze. If he returned to her bearing a rich present, he might, with the help of Heaven and a face of brass, succeed in making her believe that he had merely pretended to forget the vital date in order to enhance the surprise.

It was a scheme. Like some great general forming his plan of campaign on the eve of battle, Archie had the whole thing neatly worked out inside a minute. He scribbled a note to Mr. Wheeler, explaining the situation and promising reasonable payment on the instalment system; then, placing the note in a conspicuous position on the easel, he leaped to the telephone: and presently found himself connected with Lucille's room at the Cosmopolis.

"Hullo, darling," he cooed.

There was a slight pause at the other end of the wire.

"Oh, hullo, Archie!"

Lucille's voice was dull and listless, and Archie's experienced ear could detect that she had been crying. He raised his right foot, and kicked himself indignantly on the left ankle.

"Many happy returns of the day, old thing!"

A muffled sob floated over the wire.

"Have you only just remembered?" said Lucille in a small voice.

Archie, bracing himself up, cackled gleefully into the receiver.

"Did I take you in, light of my home? Do you mean to say you really thought I had forgotten? For Heaven's sake!"

"You didn't say a word at breakfast."

"Ah, but that was all part of the devilish cunning. I hadn't got a present for you then. At least, I didn't know whether it was ready."

"Oh, Archie, you darling!" Lucille's voice had lost its crushed melancholy. She trilled like a thrush, or a linnet, or any bird that goes in largely for trilling. "Have you really got me a present?"

"It's here now. The dickens of a fruity picture. One of J. B. Wheeler's things. You'll like it."

"Oh, I know I shall. I love his work. You are an angel. We'll hang it over the piano."

"I'll be round with it in something under three ticks, star of my soul. I'll take a taxi."

"Yes, do hurry! I want to hug you!"

"Right-o!" said Archie. "I'll take two taxis."

It is not far from Washington Square to the Hotel Cosmopolis, and Archie made the journey without mishap. There was a little unpleasantness with the cabman before starting--he, on the prudish plea that he was a married man with a local reputation to keep up, declining at first to be seen in company with the masterpiece. But, on Archie giving a promise to keep the front of the picture away from the public gaze, he consented to take the job on; and, some ten minutes later, having made his way blushfully through the hotel lobby and endured the frank curiosity of the boy who worked the elevator, Archie entered his suite, the picture under his arm.

He placed it carefully against the wall in order to leave himself more scope for embracing Lucille, and when the joyful reunion--or the sacred scene, if you prefer so to call it, was concluded, he stepped forward to turn it round and exhibit it.

"Why, it's enormous," said Lucille. "I didn't know Mr. Wheeler ever painted pictures that size. When you said it was one of his, I thought it must be the original of a magazine drawing or something like--Oh!"

Archie had moved back and given her an uninterrupted view of the work of

art, and she had started as if some unkindly disposed person had driven a bradawl into her.

"Pretty ripe, what?" said Archie enthusiastically.

Lucille did not speak for a moment. It may have been sudden joy that kept her silent. Or, on the other hand, it may not. She stood looking at the picture with wide eyes and parted lips.

"A bird, eh?" said Archie.

"Y--yes," said Lucille.

"I knew you'd like it," proceeded Archie with animation, "You see? you're by way of being a picture-hound--know all about the things, and what not--inherit it from the dear old dad, I shouldn't wonder. Personally, I can't tell one picture from another as a rule, but I'm bound to say, the moment I set eyes on this, I said to myself 'What ho!' or words to that effect, I rather think this will add a touch of distinction to the home, yes, no? I'll hang it up, shall I? 'Phone down to the office, light of my soul, and tell them to send up a nail, a bit of string, and the hotel hammer."

"One moment, darling. I'm not quite sure."

"Eh?"

"Where it ought to hang, I mean. You see--"

"Over the piano, you said. The jolly old piano."

"Yes, but I hadn't seen it then."

A monstrous suspicion flitted for an instant into Archie's mind.

"I say, you do like it, don't you?" he said anxiously.

"Oh, Archie, darling! Of course I do!-And it was so sweet of you to give it to me. But, what I was trying to say was that this picture is so--so striking that I feel that we ought to wait a little while and decide where it would have the best effect. The light over the piano is rather strong."

"You think it ought to hang in a dimmish light, what?"

"Yes, yes. The dimmer the--I mean, yes, in a dim light. Suppose we leave it in the corner for the moment--over there--behind the sofa, and--and I'll think it over. It wants a lot of thought, you know."

"Right-o! Here?"

"Yes, that will do splendidly. Oh, and, Archie."



"Hullo?"

"I think perhaps... Just turn its face to the wall, will you?" Lucille gave a little gulp. "It will prevent it getting dusty."

It perplexed Archie a little during the next few days to notice in Lucille, whom he had always looked on as pre-eminently a girl who knew her own mind, a curious streak of vacillation. Quite half a dozen times he suggested various spots on the wall as suitable for the Venus, but Lucille seemed unable to decide. Archie wished that she would settle on something definite, for he wanted to invite J. B. Wheeler to the suite to see the thing. He had heard nothing from the artist since the day he had removed the picture, and one morning, encountering him on Broadway, he expressed his appreciation of the very decent manner in which the other had taken the whole affair.

"Oh, that!" said J. B. Wheeler. "My dear fellow, you're welcome." He paused for a moment. "More than welcome," he added. "You aren't much of an expert on pictures, are you?"

"Well," said Archie, "I don't know that you'd call me an absolute nib, don't you know, but of course I know enough to see that this particular exhibit is not a little fruity. Absolutely one of the best things you've ever done, laddie."

A slight purple tinge manifested itself in Mr. Wheeler's round and rosy face. His eyes bulged.

"What are you talking about, you Tishbite? You misguided son of Belial, are you under the impression that I painted that thing?"

"Didn't you?"

Mr. Wheeler swallowed a little convulsively.

"My fiancée painted it," he said shortly.

"Your fiancée? My dear old lad, I didn't know you were engaged. Who is she? Do I know her?"

"Her name is Alice Wigmore. You don't know her."

"And she painted that picture?" Archie was perturbed. "But, I say! Won't she be apt to wonder where the thing has got to?"

"I told her it had been stolen. She thought it a great compliment, and was tickled to death. So that's all right."

"And, of course, she'll paint you another."

"Not while I have my strength she won't," said J. B. Wheeler firmly.

"She's given up painting since I taught her golf, thank goodness, and my best efforts shall be employed in seeing that she doesn't have a relapse."

"But, laddie," said Archie, puzzled, "you talk as though there were something wrong with the picture. I thought it dashed hot stuff."

"God bless you!" said J. B. Wheeler.

Archie proceeded on his way, still mystified. Then he reflected that artists as a class were all pretty weird and rummy and talked more or less consistently through their hats. You couldn't ever take an artist's opinion on a picture. Nine out of ten of them had views on Art which would have admitted them to any looney-bin, and no questions asked. He had met several of the species who absolutely raved over things which any reasonable chappie would decline to be found dead in a ditch with. His admiration for the Wigmore Venus, which had faltered for a moment during his conversation with J. B. Wheeler, returned in all its pristine vigour. Absolute rot, he meant to say, to try to make out that it wasn't one of the ones and just like mother used to make. Look how Lucille had liked it!

At breakfast next morning, Archie once more brought up the question of the hanging of the picture. It was absurd to let a thing like that go on wasting its sweetness behind a sofa with its face to the wall.

"Touching the jolly old masterpiece," he said, "how about it? I think it's time we hoisted it up somewhere."

Lucille fiddled pensively with her coffee-spoon.

"Archie, dear," she said, "I've been thinking."

"And a very good thing to do," said Archie. "I've often meant to do it myself when I got a bit of time."

"About that picture, I mean. Did you know it was father's birthday to-morrow?"

"Why no, old thing, I didn't, to be absolutely honest. Your revered parent doesn't confide in me much these days, as a matter of fact."

"Well, it is. And I think we ought to give him a present."

"Absolutely. But how? I'm all for spreading sweetness and light, and cheering up the jolly old pater's sorrowful existence, but I haven't a bean. And, what is more, things have come to such a pass that I scan the horizon without seeing a single soul I can touch. I suppose I could get into Reggie van Tuyl's ribs for a bit, but--I don't know--touching poor old Reggie always seems to me rather like potting a pitting bird."

"Of course, I don't want you to do anything like that. I was

thinking--Archie, darling, would you be very hurt if I gave father the picture?"

"Oh, I say!"

"Well, I can't think of anything else."

"But wouldn't you miss it most frightfully?"

"Oh, of course I should. But you see--father's birthday--"

Archie had always thought Lucille the dearest and most unselfish angel in the world, but never had the fact come home to him so forcibly as now. He kissed her fondly.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "You really are, you know! This is the biggest thing since jolly old Sir Philip What's-his-name gave the drink of water to the poor blighter whose need was greater than his, if you recall the incident. I had to sweat it up at school, I remember. Sir Philip, poor old bean, had a most ghastly thirst on, and he was just going to have one on the house, so to speak, when... but it's all in the history-books. This is the sort of thing Boy Scouts do! Well, of course, it's up to you, queen of my soul. If you feel like making the sacrifice, right-o! Shall I bring the pater up here and show him the picture?"

"No, I shouldn't do that. Do you think you could get into his suite

to-morrow morning and hang it up somewhere? You see, if he had the chance of--what I mean is, if--yes, I think it would be best to hang it up and let him discover it there."

"It would give him a surprise, you mean, what?"

"Yes."

Lucille sighed inaudibly. She was a girl with a conscience, and that conscience was troubling her a little. She agreed with Archie that the discovery of the Wigmore Venus in his artistically furnished suite would give Mr. Brewster a surprise. Surprise, indeed, was perhaps an inadequate word. She was sorry for her father, but the instinct of self-preservation is stronger than any other emotion.

Archie whistled merrily on the following morning as, having driven a nail into his father-in-law's wallpaper, he adjusted the cord from which the Wigmore Venus was suspended. He was a kind-hearted young man, and, though Mr. Daniel Brewster had on many occasions treated him with a good deal of austerity, his simple soul was pleased at the thought of doing him a good turn. He had just completed his work and was stepping cautiously down, when a voice behind him nearly caused him to overbalance.

"What the devil?"

Archie turned beamingly.

"Hullo, old thing! Many happy returns of the day!"

Mr. Brewster was standing in a frozen attitude. His strong face was slightly flushed.

"What--what--?" he gurgled.

Mr. Brewster was not in one of his sunniest moods that morning. The proprietor of a large hotel has many things to disturb him, and to-day things had been going wrong. He had come up to his suite with the idea of restoring his shaken nerve system with a quiet cigar, and the sight of his son-in-law had, as so frequently happened, made him feel worse than ever. But, when Archie had descended from the chair and moved aside to allow him an uninterrupted view of the picture, Mr. Brewster realised that a worse thing had befallen him than a mere visit from one who always made him feel that the world was a bleak place.

He stared at the Venus dumbly. Unlike most hotel-proprietors, Daniel Brewster was a connoisseur of Art. Connoisseuring was, in fact, his hobby. Even the public rooms of the Cosmopolis were decorated with taste, and his own private suite was a shrine of all that was best and most artistic. His tastes were quiet and restrained, and it is not too much to say that the Wigmore Venus hit him behind the ear like a stuffed eel-skin.

So great was the shock that for some moments it kept him silent, and before he could recover speech Archie had explained.

"It's a birthday present from Lucille, don't you know."

Mr. Brewster crushed down the breezy speech he had intended to utter.

"Lucille gave me--that?" he muttered.

He swallowed pathetically. He was suffering, but the iron courage of the Brewsters stood him in good stead. This man was no weakling. Presently the rigidity of his face relaxed. He was himself again. Of all things in the world he loved his daughter most, and if, in whoever mood of temporary insanity, she had brought herself to suppose that this beastly daub was the sort of thing he would like for a birthday present, he must accept the situation like a man. He would on the whole have preferred death to a life lived in the society of the Wigmore Venus, but even that torment must be endured if the alternative was the hurting of Lucille's feelings.

"I think I've chosen a pretty likely spot to hang the thing, what?" said Archie cheerfully. "It looks well alongside those Japanese prints, don't you think? Sort of stands out."

Mr. Brewster licked his dry lips and grinned a ghastly grin.



"It does stand out!" he agreed.