

## CHAPTER XXVI. A TALE OF A GRANDFATHER

Archie was not a man who readily allowed himself to become worried, especially about people who were not in his own immediate circle of friends, but in the course of the next week he was bound to admit that he was not altogether easy in his mind about his father-in-law's mental condition. He had read all sorts of things in the Sunday papers and elsewhere about the constant strain to which captains of industry are subjected, a strain which sooner or later is only too apt to make the victim go all blooey, and it seemed to him that Mr. Brewster was beginning to find the going a trifle too tough for his stamina. Undeniably he was behaving in an odd manner, and Archie, though no physician, was aware that, when the American business-man, that restless, ever-active human machine, starts behaving in an odd manner, the next thing you know is that two strong men, one attached to each arm, are hurrying him into the cab bound for Bloomingdale.

He did not confide his misgivings to Lucille, not wishing to cause her anxiety. He hunted up Reggie van Tuyl at the club, and sought advice from him.

"I say, Reggie, old thing--present company excepted--have there been any loonies in your family?"

Reggie stirred in the slumber which always gripped him in the early

afternoon.

"Loonies?" he mumbled, sleepily. "Rather! My uncle Edgar thought he was twins."

"Twins, eh?"

"Yes. Silly idea! I mean, you'd have thought one of my uncle Edgar would have been enough for any man."

"How did the thing start?" asked Archie.

"Start? Well, the first thing we noticed was when he began wanting two of everything. Had to set two places for him at dinner and so on. Always wanted two seats at the theatre. Ran into money, I can tell you."

"He didn't behave rummily up till then? I mean to say, wasn't sort of jumpy and all that?"

"Not that I remember. Why?"

Archie's tone became grave.

"Well, I'll tell you, old man, though I don't want it to go any farther, that I'm a bit worried about my jolly old father-in-law. I believe he's about to go in off the deep-end. I think he's cracking under the strain.

Dashed weird his behaviour has been the last few days."

"Such as?" murmured Mr. van Tuyl.

"Well, the other morning I happened to be in his suite--incidentally he wouldn't go above ten dollars, and I wanted twenty-five--and he suddenly picked up a whacking big paper-weight and bunged it for all he was worth."

"At you?"

"Not at me. That was the rummy part of it. At a mosquito on the wall, he said. Well, I mean to say, do chappies bung paper-weights at mosquitoes? I mean, is it done?"

"Smash anything?"

"Curiously enough, no. But he only just missed a rather decent picture which Lucille had given him for his birthday. Another foot to the left and it would have been a goner."

"Sounds queer."

"And, talking of that picture, I looked in on him about a couple of afternoons later, and he'd taken it down from the wall and laid it on the floor and was staring at it in a dashed marked sort of manner. That

was peculiar, what?"

"On the floor?"

"On the jolly old carpet. When I came in, he was goggling at it in a sort of glassy way. Absolutely rapt, don't you know. My coming in gave him a start--seemed to rouse him from a kind of trance, you know--and he jumped like an antelope; and, if I hadn't happened to grab him, he would have trampled bang on the thing. It was deuced unpleasant, you know. His manner was rummy. He seemed to be brooding on something. What ought I to do about it, do you think? It's not my affair, of course, but it seems to me that, if he goes on like this, one of these days he'll be stabbing, someone with a pickle-fork."

To Archie's relief, his father-in-law's symptoms showed no signs of development. In fact, his manner reverted to the normal once more, and a few days later, meeting Archie in the lobby of the hotel, he seemed quite cheerful. It was not often that he wasted his time talking to his son-in-law, but on this occasion he chatted with him for several minutes about the big picture-robbery which had formed the chief item of news on the front pages of the morning papers that day. It was Mr. Brewster's opinion that the outrage had been the work of a gang and that nobody was safe.

Daniel Brewster had spoken of this matter with strange earnestness, but his words had slipped from Archie's mind when he made his way that night

to his father-in-law's suite. Archie was in an exalted mood. In the course of dinner he had had a bit of good news which was occupying his thoughts to the exclusion of all other matters. It had left him in a comfortable, if rather dizzy, condition of benevolence to all created things. He had smiled at the room-clerk as he crossed the lobby, and if he had had a dollar, he would have given it to the boy who took him up in the elevator.

He found the door of the Brewster suite unlocked which at any other time would have struck him as unusual; but to-night he was in no frame of mind to notice these trivialities. He went in, and, finding the room dark and no one at home, sat down, too absorbed in his thoughts to switch on the lights, and gave himself up to dreamy meditation.

There are certain moods in which one loses count of time, and Archie could not have said how long he had been sitting in the deep arm-chair near the window when he first became aware that he was not alone in the room. He had closed his eyes, the better to meditate, so had not seen anyone enter. Nor had he heard the door open. The first intimation he had that somebody had come in was when some hard substance knocked against some other hard object, producing a sharp sound which brought him back to earth with a jerk.

He sat up silently. The fact that the room was still in darkness made it obvious that something nefarious was afoot. Plainly there was dirty work in preparation at the cross-roads. He stared into the blackness, and, as

his eyes grew accustomed to it, was presently able to see an indistinct form bending over something on the floor. The sound of rather stertorous breathing came to him.

Archie had many defects which prevented him being the perfect man, but lack of courage was not one of them. His somewhat rudimentary intelligence had occasionally led his superior officers during the war to thank God that Great Britain had a Navy, but even these stern critics had found nothing to complain of in the manner in which he bounded over the top. Some of us are thinkers, others men of action. Archie was a man of action, and he was out of his chair and sailing in the direction of the back of the intruder's neck before a wiser man would have completed his plan of campaign. The miscreant collapsed under him with a squashy sound, like the wind going out of a pair of bellows, and Archie, taking a firm seat on his spine, rubbed the other's face in the carpet and awaited the progress of events.

At the end of half a minute it became apparent that there was going to be no counter-attack. The dashing swiftness of the assault had apparently had the effect of depriving the marauder of his entire stock of breath. He was gurgling to himself in a pained sort of way and making no effort to rise. Archie, feeling that it would be safe to get up and switch on the light, did so, and, turning after completing this manoeuvre, was greeted by the spectacle of his father-in-law, seated on the floor in a breathless and dishevelled condition, blinking at the sudden illumination. On the carpet beside Mr. Brewster lay a long knife,

and beside the knife lay the handsomely framed masterpiece of J. B. Wheeler's fiancée, Miss Alice Wigmore. Archie stared at this collection dumbly.

"Oh, what-ho!" he observed at length, feebly.

A distinct chill manifested itself in the region of Archie's spine. This could mean only one thing. His fears had been realised. The strain of modern life, with all its hustle and excitement, had at last proved too much for Mr. Brewster. Crushed by the thousand and one anxieties and worries of a millionaire's existence, Daniel Brewster had gone off his onion.

Archie was nonplussed. This was his first experience of this kind of thing. What, he asked himself, was the proper procedure in a situation of this sort? What was the local rule? Where, in a word, did he go from here? He was still musing in an embarrassed and baffled way, having taken the precaution of kicking the knife under the sofa, when Mr. Brewster spoke. And there was in, both the words and the method of their delivery so much of his old familiar self that Archie felt quite relieved.

"So it's you, is it, you wretched blight, you miserable weed!" said Mr. Brewster, having recovered enough breath to be going on with. He glowered at his son-in-law despondently. "I might have, expected it! If I was at the North Pole, I could count on you butting in!"

"Shall I get you a drink of water?" said Archie.

"What the devil," demanded Mr. Brewster, "do you imagine I want with a drink of water?"

"Well--" Archie hesitated delicately. "I had a sort of idea that you had been feeling the strain a bit. I mean to say, rush of modern life and all that sort of thing--"

"What are you doing in my room?" said Mr. Brewster, changing the subject.

"Well, I came to tell you something, and I came in here and was waiting for you, and I saw some chappie biffing about in the dark, and I thought it was a burglar or something after some of your things, so, thinking it over, I got the idea that it would be a fairly juicy scheme to land on him with both feet. No idea it was you, old thing! Frightfully sorry and all that. Meant well!"

Mr. Brewster sighed deeply. He was a just man, and he could not but realise that, in the circumstances, Archie had behaved not unnaturally.

"Oh, well!" he said. "I might have known something would go wrong."

"Awfully sorry!"



"It can't be helped. What was it you wanted to tell me?" He eyed his son-in-law piercingly. "Not a cent over twenty dollars!" he said coldly.

Archie hastened to dispel the pardonable error.

"Oh, it wasn't anything like that," he said. "As a matter of fact, I think it's a good egg. It has bucked me up to no inconsiderable degree. I was dining with Lucille just now, and, as we dallied with the food-stuffs, she told me something which--well, I'm bound to say, it made me feel considerably braced. She told me to trot along and ask you if you would mind--"

"I gave Lucille a hundred dollars only last Tuesday."

Archie was pained.

"Adjust this sordid outlook, old thing!" he urged. "You simply aren't anywhere near it. Right off the target, absolutely! What Lucille told me to ask you was if you would mind--at some tolerably near date--being a grandfather! Rotten thing to be, of course," proceeded Archie commiseratingly, "for a chappie of your age, but there it is!"

Mr. Brewster gulped.

"Do you mean to say--?"

"I mean, apt to make a fellow feel a bit of a patriarch. Snowy hair and what not. And, of course, for a chappie in the prime of life like you--"

"Do you mean to tell me--? Is this true?"

"Absolutely! Of course, speaking for myself, I'm all for it. I don't know when I've felt more bucked. I sang as I came up here--absolutely warbled in the elevator. But you--"

A curious change had come over Mr. Brewster. He was one of those men who have the appearance of having been hewn out of the solid rock, but now in some indescribable way he seemed to have melted. For a moment he gazed at Archie, then, moving quickly forward, he grasped his hand in an iron grip.

"This is the best news I've ever had!" he mumbled.

"Awfully good of you to take it like this," said Archie cordially. "I mean, being a grandfather--"

Mr. Brewster smiled. Of a man of his appearance one could hardly say that he smiled playfully; but there was something in his expression that remotely suggested playfulness.

"My dear old bean," he said.

Archie started.

"My dear old bean," repeated Mr. Brewster firmly, "I'm the happiest man in America!" His eye fell on the picture which lay on the floor. He gave a slight shudder, but recovered himself immediately. "After this," he said, "I can reconcile myself to living with that thing for the rest of my life. I feel it doesn't matter."

"I say," said Archie, "how about that? Wouldn't have brought the thing up if you hadn't introduced the topic, but, speaking as man to man, what the dickens WERE you up to when I landed on your spine just now?"

"I suppose you thought I had gone off my head?"

"Well, I'm bound to say--"

Mr. Brewster cast an unfriendly glance at the picture.

"Well, I had every excuse, after living with that infernal thing for a week!"

Archie looked at him, astonished.

"I say, old thing, I don't know if I have got your meaning exactly, but you somehow give me the impression that you don't like that jolly old

work of Art."

"Like it!" cried Mr. Brewster. "It's nearly driven me mad! Every time it caught my eye, it gave me a pain in the neck. To-night I felt as if I couldn't stand it any longer. I didn't want to hurt Lucille's feelings, by telling her, so I made up my mind I would cut the damned thing out of its frame and tell her it had been stolen."

"What an extraordinary thing! Why, that's exactly what old Wheeler did."

"Who is old Wheeler?"

"Artist chappie. Pal of mine. His fiancee painted the thing, and, when I lifted it off him, he told her it had been stolen. HE didn't seem frightfully keen on it, either."

"Your friend Wheeler has evidently good taste."

Archie was thinking.

"Well, all this rather gets past me," he said. "Personally, I've always admired the thing. Dashed ripe bit of work, I've always considered. Still, of course, if you feel that way--"

"You may take it from me that I do!"

"Well, then, in that case--You know what a clumsy devil I am--You can tell Lucille it was all my fault--"

The Wigmore Venus smiled up at Archie--it seemed to Archie with a pathetic, pleading smile. For a moment he was conscious of a feeling of guilt; then, closing his eyes and hardening his heart, he sprang lightly in the air and descended with both feet on the picture. There was a sound of rending canvas, and the Venus ceased to smile.

"Golly!" said Archie, regarding the wreckage remorsefully.

Mr. Brewster did not share his remorse. For the second time that night he gripped him by the hand.

"My boy!" he quavered. He stared at Archie as if he were seeing him with new eyes. "My dear boy, you were through the war, were you not?"

"Eh? Oh yes! Right through the jolly old war."

"What was your rank?"

"Oh, second lieutenant."

"You ought to have been a general!" Mr. Brewster clasped his hand once more in a vigorous embrace. "I only hope," he added "that your son will be like you!"

There are certain compliments, or compliments coming from certain sources, before which modesty reels, stunned. Archie's did.

He swallowed convulsively. He had never thought to hear these words from Daniel Brewster.

"How would it be, old thing," he said almost brokenly, "if you and I trickled down to the bar and had a spot of sherbet?"

THE END