Cherub Devine

By

SEWELL FORD

CHAPTER V.

CONSTERNATION fell upon Eppings when it occurred to Mr. Devine, along about 2 o'clock, to inform him that guests were expected at supper.

"Beg pardon, sir, but it is impossible, sir. We are not prepared. There's only a small filet in the house, sir, and not a duck—not a single duck."

"Have squab, then."

"But, sir, we haven't"—

"Oh, don't go on telling me what you haven't got. Hash up anything. Make some sandwiches if you can't do better. Only don't come to me with your troubles. I'm no chef. But I'm going to have some friends here tonight, and I shall expect you to feed them. That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

"Ye-e-e-es, sir. At what hour, sir?"

"Eight-thirty, sharp."

"And how—how many plates, sir?"

"I don't know. Ten or fifteen or twenty. Better make it twenty, and then you can discard."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"That's the way to talk, Eppings."

Having made these offhand preparations, Mr. Devine sat himself down on the veranda. He heard a step and looked up to see before him the aristocratic figure of the Countess Vecchi's father. Mr. Hewington seemed somewhat agitated.

"You must pardon me, sir, for a seeming impertinence," he began, "but I have just learned by accident that you contemplate giving a party here tonight. Is it a fact?"

Mr. Devine nodded. "Just a few friends, a dozen or so."

"Ah! Friends of yours?" Mr. Hewington gave the words a significant emphasis. "Then would it not be—er—prudent—perhaps discreet is the better word—for my daughter to go elsewhere for the night—to the hotel in the village perhaps?"

There was a twinkle in the Cherub's blue eyes as he responded, "Afraid of a rough house, are you?"

"My daughter, sir, is not exactly accustomed to—er—the kind of persons who might"—

"Oh, I see. Well, suit yourself about it—suit yourself. But it isn't at all necessary. I shall try to keep them quiet. There are to be only a few neighbors—the Walloways and"—

"The Walloways!"

"Yes, and the Wilburs and the Miller-Tremways and old Bishop Horton and a stray baron or two."

"Bishop Horton! Is Bishop Horton coming? Coming here?"

"Why, yes. The bishop's a friend of mine. Know him, do you?"

"We were college classmates, Mr. Devine," said Mr. Hewington.

"That so! I never went to college with the bishop, but I've crossed the ocean with him twice, and once I held his hat while he made a speech."

"Extraordinary!" said Mr. Hewington.

"Think so? It may seem a little queer to you, but the bishop doesn't appear to look at it that way. Come down and meet him and the rest of the folks, won't you? We're to have a little supper about half past 8. And, say, bring the countess—that is, unless you're afraid of the crowd."

This last was a violation of a paragraph in the Cherub's own code of ethics, a paragraph which read, "When the other fellow's down and out don't rub it in." But the words had escaped before he knew it. Fortunately Mr. Hewington did not seem to notice the allusion, for he retired, repeating in an undertone: "The Walloways! Bishop Horton! The Miller-Tremways!"

And sure enough, early in the evening the big rooms of the great house began to echo with the lively chatter of many guests. There was the portly Mrs. Walloway, whose dinner dances are always such brilliant affairs; there were the haughty Wilburs, the hyphenated Tremways and a half dozen others without whose names and pictures the Sunday supplements would be incomplete.

They were somewhat disposed to look curiously upon Mr. Cherub Devine at first, but when the bishop had patted him affectionately on the shoulder and the baron had effusively embraced him the atmosphere thawed perceptibly.

The one person who was least at his ease was young Mr. Walloway. For awhile he was stiffer than ever, and he had the air of one who expects something very embarrassing to happen.

But the Cherub was undisturbed. Thus far he had gained his point. Whether Nick Walloway had been influenced by that suggestion of future business or whether he had acted purely from motives of good fellowship he cared not. The thing had been done. The program which the Cherub had so hastily outlined that morning was being carried out. Moreover, his guests appeared to be enjoying the novelty.

In the course of half an hour even young Walloway seemed to have become reconciled that nothing untoward was going to happen. As a matter of fact, Mr. Devine was disarming him completely.

"Isn't he unique? So charmingly naive!" whispered Mrs. Miller-Tremway.

"Perfectly delightful!" assented Mrs. Wilbur. "He says such odd things."

"So glad you're to be a neighbor of ours," the latter assured Mr. Devine. "And how do you like Hewington Acres?"

"Oh, it's a good deal like living in Central park," observed the Cherub; "grass looks as if it had had a shave, a hair cut and a shampoo, you know! All the place lacks are some benches and nurses and baby carriages. I may have to bring those up here until I get used to it."

"Is it true, Mr. Devine," demanded Mrs. Walloway, "that you started on your financial career with only a few thousand dollars?"

"Few thousand!" echoed the Cherub. "Why, I've seen the time when it would have made me dizzy just to think of having a whole thousand!"

"Do tell us about it, Mr. Devine," urged Mrs. Wilbur, adjusting her lorgnette.

"Go ahead, Cherub. I want to hear that yarn, too," seconded Nick Walloway. "That was before you came east, wasn't it?"

"Yes; that was in Chicago," said the Cherub. "I began as office boy and

"IN RETREAT! WHAT DO YOU MEAN, DEVINE?"

drew down the princely salary of $3 a week. I was saving to go into business for myself. There was a pie and coffee stand around the corner from our office, and I had my eye on that. I thought it would be a fine thing to sell pie and coffee and be my own boss. So I got the fellow's price for the outfit. He wanted $75, and it seemed to me as though he'd asked for enough to pay off the national debt. But I saved the seventy-five and a few dollars more for a sinking fund.

"Then I resigned. I rather expected the firm to go under when they got that blow. They didn't, though.

"When I went around to the pie and coffee man with my seventy-five he laughed and told me to brush by. His sales had jumped ten pies a day, and he had put his price up to an even hundred. For about five minutes things looked to me as the wash does when they get too much bluing in the tub. Then I braced up and squandered 50 cents on the first real feed I'd had for a year.

"After that it was sunrise again. I drifted into a place where they were selling dollar options on July wheat, and the first thing I knew I was plunging like a porpoise. Inside of two hours I had almost $300 in my pocket, and I knew how a Rothschild feels. I went back to the stand, shook my roll at the pie butcher and did a lot of other fool things, all meant to show the folks that I was it.

"Next day I hunted up a regular broker and began to speculate, nice and proper, on margins. I hadn't been at that more than a week before I hit the market right, and I've been hitting it ever since, except when it's hit me. Oh, yes, it hits back now and then, just to show me"—

He ended his story abruptly.

"What's that, Eppings? Did you say supper? Good! Come on, folks; let's see what the cook has found in the icebox."

Probably the Wilburs and the Miller-Tremways had never been summoned to dine in just that fashion before. Perhaps the novelty pleased them, for they were in high good humor. They told each other that Mr. Devine was delightfully original.

In spite of Eppings' fears it was a very good supper, but Mr. Devine took no note of it. He was thinking about the countess.

It was toward the close of the affair that the bishop took Mr. Devine one side and asked, "Do you know what has become of the Hewingtons?"

"Sure!" said the Cherub. "They're all upstairs in retreat."

"In retreat! What do you mean, Devine?"

"It's because of me, you know. They don't approve of me. Mr. Hewington's writing a book about my wicked ways—gets his material from the newspapers. It'll be a thick book, I guess."

"Now, if that isn't just like De Courcey!" exclaimed the bishop. "Splendid fellow, though, in his way."

"So I've heard."

"If you don't mind, Devine, I'll run up and see him for a few minutes before I go."

"Oh, help yourself. They're somewhere on the top floor behind a barricade."

"I'll bring him out of that," said the bishop. But he had not reckoned on the full strength of Mr. Hewington's prejudice.

"It's not on my account, my dear bishop," said Mr. Hewington, "but I must guard my daughter from such association."

"Nonsense, De Courcey! Devine lacks polish, perhaps, but at heart he is an honest chap. Come down and meet him and bring Adele."

"No, no; I couldn't think of it," firmly responded Mr. Hewington. "We shall remain here until he goes away." So the bishop went back alone.

When it was over, when the last of them had gone, Mr. Cherub Devine, groping about for some fitting term to express the situation, remarked enigmatically:

"That's what I call playing a four flush against a full house. Guess I'll take another stack, though."

Which meant that the audacious soul of Mr. Devine was humbled, but not crushed.

He had tried to demonstrate to Mr. Hewington that his estimate of Cherub Devine as one of the socially unfit was a mistaken judgment. But evidently he had demonstrated nothing of the kind. The Hewingtons had given him no chance to show what he could do in that line. Well, should he quit then? Mr. Devine allowed himself to smile grimly. Almost any one in Wall street could have told you what that meant.

CHAPTER VI.

THE big rooms at Hewington Acres were empty and very still long before midnight, but the Cherub continued to sit in the library, smoking and meditating. He had a trick when watching an unsteady market of tearing pieces of paper into small bits and throwing them away. He was doing this now, and the eastern rug under his feet looked as if it had been visited by a stage snowstorm. He was aroused by an odd noise. It sounded as if some one was dragging a heavy object down the stairs.

Looking out through the door hangings, he could see the lower half of the staircase. For a moment he waited, and then there appeared the Countess Vecchi, tugging at a dress suit case which was evidently well filled. She was dressed as if for the street, with a light silk dust coat over her black gown and a jaunty straw hat on her head. When she saw the Cherub she seemed startled and shrank back guiltily.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "I—I did not expect to find you here. I am going away."

"Are you? Do you generally start alone and in the middle of the night?" The Cherub had walked out into the hall.

"I—I don't care to talk to you about it, Mr. Devine. I am going away, I tell you." Her brown eyes looked as if they might fill with tears at any moment.

"All right, all right," he said soothingly. "You needn't talk about it."

The Countess Vecchi allowed the suit case to slide to the floor, and then she faced him resolutely.

"Mr. Devine, I have found out all about you."

"Me!"

"Yes. I know why you are here."

"Good! You know a blamed sight more than I do then."

"It is useless for you to try to keep up the deceit any longer, Mr. Devine. My father has confessed the whole wretched story. He told me at first that you were merely here on some law business, but when I heard that you were entertaining your friends here, just as you would in your own house, I demanded to be told the truth. And now I know. Oh, I know it all! This is your house. You own it. Somehow or other you have tricked my poor father out of it, and now our beau-ti-ful ho-o-ome is yours. Dare you deny it? Come! Isn't it so?"

The Cherub bowed his head in meek submission.

"Then," exclaimed the countess, "you are not only a wicked man, but you are deceitful, cruel! I despise you! You—you are"—

Just what else he was the astonished Cherub was never to know, for at that point the denunciation was interrupted. The threatening flood submerged the brown eyes, and the countess, sinking down on the bottom stair, leaned against the carved newel post and sobbed tempestuously into the ample sleeve of the silk coat.

"Oh, say, now!" he protested. "See here, won't you? I didn't mean it. I take it all back, honest, I do. Come, now; let's talk it over. Oh, stop it! Do stop it!"

To the Cherub's urgent entreaties she paid not the slightest heed.

She grasped the suit case and marched past him with as much dignity as it was possible to assume with a heavy weight dragging down one arm. At the door she made a determined attack on the bolts. Stupidly the Cherub watched her as she tugged away vainly.

"You had better wait until morning, hadn't you?" he suggested.

To this she made no reply, but shoved and pulled at the stubborn bolts until she was forced to give up. Then, just as he had thought her beaten, she went promptly to one of the French windows in a front room, turned the catch and stepped out on the veranda. Mr. Devine followed.

"I do not wish for your company, Mr. Devine."

"I suppose you don't, but I'm going just the same. I'll get my coat and hat."

As he ran back into the hall he heard the countess leave the veranda. Snatching up an opera hat and a raincoat, he hurried out through the window after her. She was easily overtaken, for the suit case acted as a brake.

"You'd better let me carry your bag," he said as he overtook her, but the offer was ignored, and the repulsed Cheub fell back a pace. Thus they started down the narrow graveled path which wound a leisurely course in and out among the shrubbery toward the main road.

"See here," he said sternly as he stepped forward beside her; "you must let me take that bag."

"I shall not! I don't need your"—she began bravely enough, but the Cherub had already lifted it from her numbed fingers.

"I know you don't," he said, "but I've got the bag."

A low grumble of distant thunder caused the countess to slacken her pace.

"There!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "It's going to rain, you see. Did you hear that?"

"Yes, I heard."

"But where are you going?"

The countess stopped abruptly and turned to say: "I think I told you, Mr. Devine, that I did not care to discuss my plans with you at all. Will you give me my bag?"

"No," said the Cherub. "I shall lug it myself, and I shall follow you until I see you safe somewhere."

With a gesture of impatience the countess resumed her way.

A brisk breeze sprang up somewhere. The treetops began to rock and sway like drunken men. Several sharp crashes of thunder came in quick succession, and the bare highway emerged for an instant from indistinct gloom as the lightning revealed every detail. Then there came a hush. Big drops of rain fell with menacing impact on the crown of the Cherub's opera hat.

"There! I told you it was going to rain," he announced. "Hold on, now; I'm going to put this coat on you."

The countess hesitated. He had dropped the bag and was holding up the coat by the collar. Another and more vivid flash than any which had preceded it revealed him with photographic distinctness. She could not help noting that he looked very well in evening dress. He did not seem so much inclined to stoutness as in a business suit.

"No; you need the coat yourself. You'll be wet through in a moment." The big drops struck through her thin silk sleeves coldly on her arms.

Then she allowed him to help her into the raincoat.

"Come on," he said, picking up the bag and starting ahead. The rain was now drumming a roaring tattoo on the crown of his hat.

"You must take my arm or you'll fall," ordered the Cherub. Meekly she obeyed, and they went plunging and sliding through the storm.

"Oh, you're being drenched!" said the countess. Apparently he did not hear. "You are wet through, aren't you?" she shouted in his ear.

"Not quite," he answered calmly. "Come on."

There ensued a period during which they stumbled and slid along in silence. At last they discovered several houses near the road.

"We're getting into the village," announced the Cherub. "Isn't that where we want to go?"

"Yes," said the countess. "I suppose so."

"But where? Whereabouts in the village?"

"The railroad station."

"The railroad station!" The Cherub echoed this as if he had never heard the words before. "What do you want to go there for?"

"Because I am going away," said the countess wearily. "I'm going away."

Five minutes later, when they reached the station, he saw with joy that it was one of those low, wide roofed affairs, under whose eaves they could at least find shelter from the pelting rain.

The station was dark, and all the doors were locked, of course, but there was a baggage truck. He dropped the suit case with a sigh of relief and gently helped the countess to a seat on the baggage truck.

"Well, this is something like, isn't it? Great, eh?" he demanded. At every step his shoes made a slushing sound.

"Your feet must be terribly wet," suggested the countess.

"Wet! Oh, they're not so very wet. I felt fine after that walk, don't you?"

"I—I'm rather tired."

"Yes, probably you are. But now you can rest. You can rest while we are waiting for the train, you know. What time do we get a train anyway?"

"There's one at half past 7 in the morning!"

"Yes; that's the first one."

The Cherub took out his watch and tried to see the face of it, but there was not light enough.

"Look here," he said, leaning against the truck and peering at the countess earnestly. "You don't mean to stay here until half past 7, do you?"

"I—I don't know," said the countess weakly. "I did when I started, but

"OH, YOU'RE BEING DRENCHED!" SAID THE COUNTESS

but I'm tired now and wet and— Oh, I wish I hadn't come at all; I wish I hadn't."

"There, there!" said the Cherub, patting her shoulder. "Don't you worry. I'll go and rout out some one. I'll get a team to take us back."

"No, no! I don't want to stay here alone. Please don't leave me here alone, Mr. Devine!" She grasped his hand and clung to it tightly.

"All right, all right! I won't leave you. We'll go together and find some one. See; it isn't raining nearly so hard as it was. I think the shower must be almost over. Shall we start now?"

The countess was quite ready. There was a livery stable just across from the station, she said. Fortunately they found a night hostler dozing in the office. It was with difficulty, however, that he could be induced to harness a pair of horses. His chief desire seemed to be to gaze at the dripping clothes of Mr. Devine.

The drive back to Hewington Acres was silent and uneventful. As they neared the house they saw that it was brightly illuminated. Out through the open front doors streamed a broad pathway of light across which figures were moving. One of these was Mr. Hewington.

"Adele!" he exclaimed, with much dramatic fervor as he saw the countess and stretched out his arms to receive her. She went to him and promptly began to sob on his shoulder.

Next appeared the soggily clothed Cherub with the suit case. "Whew!" he exclaimed, throwing down the bag. Then, turning to the gaping butler, "Eppings, see if you can find me a dry cigar and a match."

"Mr. Devine, what does this mean, sir?" thundered Mr. Hewington. "I demand an explanation."

"Well, what do you want me to explain—that the rain is wet?" returned the Cherub.

"This is no time for levity, sir. Adele, please go upstairs." Mr. Hewington strode toward Mr. Devine threateningly.

"I want you to explain your astounding conduct, sir," repeated Mr. Hewington.

"Father, father!" pleaded the countess. "I'll tell you all about it."

"Silence, Adele! Go to your room. I will deal with this Mr. Devine."

"Now, don't you be in a hurry, Mr. Hewington, and we'll clear this little mystery in no time," said the Cherub.

"Little mystery, sir!" The tall figure of Mr. Hewington stiffened with anger. "What do you mean, sir? I wake up in the middle of the night to discover that my daughter has fled. I arouse Eppings to learn that he left you at 11 o'clock waiting for her in the library. I find the window open. I discover that you are both gone. And now, at this hour in the morning, you come back in a public carriage. You are a wretch, Mr. Devine, a scheming, villainous"—

"Stop, father, stop! This is too absurd." The Countess Vecchi had stepped between the two men. "It was all my fault. I was running away, and Mr. Devine tried to stop me, and when I wouldn't be stopped he went with me and carried the bag. Then it rained, and he got wet. He is splendid, splendid, and he is very wet."

"Sure, he is wet," assented Mrs. Timmins solemnly.

In a dazed manner Mr. Hewington inspected once more the obviously damp condition of Mr. Devine's raiment.

"Yes, yes, Adele. I suppose it is all right, but it is not yet clear in my mind."

The Cherub was not inclined to continue the dialogue. "Oh, we'll straighten that all out in the morning, Mr. Hewington."

A moment later the chimes of a French clock announced the hour of 3.

"Three o'clock!" exclaimed the Cherub. "I don't believe you'll catch that 7:30 train, will you, countess?"

She had started up the stairs, but she turned to smile and shake her head. It was a friendly smile.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The conditions existing in the cow stable, coupled with the care given the utensils in which the milk is kept, are the chief factors in determining whether the butter product resulting from the dairy operations is gilt edged "western extra" or rancid stuff that is barely fit for food. It is just a matter of filth and bacteria or absence of it that largely determines butter quality.