

ROMANCE, RATTLESNAKES AND MIDDLEMEN

I

VICTOR ORDE scraped acquaintance with Miss Nancy Lawrence in Kensington Gardens, because Nancy's Chow, a beast of more than human intelligence, had insisted upon following Victor instead of his mistress. Anybody who knows anything about Chows will admit that this was most extraordinary. Victor, however, was not surprised. The wildest and shyest of animals recognized in young Orde a friend. Whether he carried food for them or not, birds settled upon his shoulders; if he stood still in any of the public parks, squirrels cuddled up to him. When he mentioned this to Miss Lawrence, she smiled sweetly and forgave the faithless Chow. Acquaintance ripened into friendship, and that in turn was kindled into a warmer sentiment. The day dawned when Victor pointed out to Nancy that the prospects of an article clerk with those crusted family solicitors, Hemingway and Batson, were not sufficiently bright to justify marriage. Nancy, a sensible girl, repudiated the time-worn lovers' contention that what was enough for one would suffice for two.

"We should be indissolubly ONE," affirmed the ardent young man.

Mr. Nicholas Hemingway happened to be Orde's uncle, a bachelor who might leave a "plum" to a deserving nephew in the fullness of time.

"But," said Victor, "the old lad doesn't regard me, his only sister's son, as deserving; and he's likely to

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

outlive—I mean out-exist, because he never has *lived*—me.”

“Would he be so inconsiderate?” murmured Nancy.

“You don’t know him, my lamb. It’s a liberal education not to know such a man as Uncle Nick.”

This was unfair on Mr. Hemingway. In his own peculiar fashion he invited trust and confidence, but he did not trust or confide in others; a lean, secretive, desiccated man, but not unkindly or ungenerous if you delved deep beneath a petrified surface.

Nancy, who had never met Mr. Hemingway, asked two questions, pebbles dropped into a pond, which affected tremendously two placid lives.

“How do family solicitors make their money? Why are they called *family* solicitors?”

“Hemingway and Batson,” replied Victor, promptly, “are really middlemen. The business is not what it was, simply because so many old families are down and out. My uncle bucks to me because he keeps his clients out of expensive litigation. Some of the older clients hand over to him all their affairs. I can’t mention names, but one doddering old marquess can’t buy a toothbrush without consulting Uncle Nick. His ancient lordship hasn’t a cheque-book. Uncle sends him what petty cash he wants. Incredible, but true! Mind you, Uncle Nick knows his job. He protects his die-hards against everybody except himself. There are nice pickings——! He only charges legal fees for his little flip-flaps, but—the letters! And the—interviews! Time is indeed money when Uncle Nick is talking with his Victorian clients.”

“What is a middleman, Vic?”

“Your father is a middleman, but he might be furious if you told him so. He is the head of an old-established firm of *family* wine-merchants. He is too honest to make the wine. He buys it in the open market and sells at a profit. He is a go-between. So is Uncle Nick. He buys

Dew of the Sea

and sells land, shares, farming implements, and every other thing that the old families are too lazy to buy for themselves. Have you got it ? ”

Nancy nodded.

“ Why can't you do this, Vic ? ”

“ I shall in time if—which is no cert—I get a junior partnership, and if, by then, there are any old families left.”

“ I mean *now*, dearest. It seems so easy. You find out what some lazy person wants ; you buy it, whatever it is, in the wholesale market, deliver the goods, and charge the retail price.”

“ Yes ; sounds easy as kiss hands, but it isn't.”

II

Nevertheless the idea burgeoned. Within a week an opportunity presented itself. A Daughter of the Golden West expressed a wish to buy a lion cub, a wish put into print by a retailer of Society gossip. Victor, in the true spirit of adventure, wrote to the young lady :

“ Am prepared to supply magnificent lion cub.”

Having dispatched this curt epistle, and without waiting for a reassuring reply, he rushed down to Zamrach's and secured an option on a lion's cub. He made the acquaintance of the cub ; he fondled it ; the cub seemed to like Victor.

Next day Victor took the cub to Claridge's Hotel, and played “ Hunt the Slipper ” with it in the presence of the millionairess. He made a fiver out of the deal as middleman and a friend of Mr. Zamrach. He cuddled the cub, saying with superb effrontery :

“ If your friends want anything in the zoo-ological line, here is my business card.”

Upon the card was inscribed in neat script his uncle's address in Old Square, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

That, of course, was unsound tactics, but the mere name Old Square, inspired confidence. It was part of Victor's matutinal duties to attend to the correspondence. Letters addressed to himself he could stuff into a pocket without challenging attention.

During the following fortnight he sold a mongoose, a flamingo, several macaws and parrots, and a small crocodile.

Business being so brisk, he inadvertently perpetrated a second blunder. Hemingway and Batson, creatures of habit, invariably lunched together at one. Between one and two, Victor, so to speak, was in command of offices so dingy, so dirty, that they never failed to command instant respect from all visitors. Buyers of strange beasts and fowls began to call upon Mr. Orde, by appointment, between one and two.

Incidentally, he squared Binks, the office-boy, which was wise, inasmuch as a young lady, connected with the theatrical profession, called inopportunately between two and half-past, when Victor was eating his chop in the Strand. The office-boy said, blandly :

"The gentleman who attends to our wild beast department has just stepped out. Will you kindly write, madam ?"

"I only wanted a python that I could play with on the stage."

"We don't keep our pythons in Old Square, madam. Our Mr. Orde will submit to you a sample."

"Do you sell many snakes ?"

"Business in serpents, madam, has been slumping, but it's looking up."

This slight misadventure ought to have been a warning to Victor, but it wasn't. He laughed and tipped handsomely a very promising liar.

Nancy, to use her own words, was the first to get cold toes. Victor's success as a middleman frightened her.

Dew of the Sea

Instinct suggested that her lover was gambolling upon the edge of a volcano. The gift of a bangle did not allay her virginal fears.

“ If your uncle finds out——”

“ Why should he ? ”

“ I said IF——”

“ The ‘ ifs,’ Nancy, coagulated as they may appear to a maiden of your tender years, are really the romance of life. If I am sacked I shall start a lucrative business of my own. If past success indicates, as it does, a golden future, we two shall be furnishing a tiny flat before we know where we are.”

They embraced fondly.

III

As Victor pointed out to Nancy, it is only the path of untrue love that runs smooth as Tarmac to the hymeneal altar. Nancy’s father eyed an articulated clerk with detachment rather than attachment. At his house Victor was not *persona grata*. Accordingly, the young people were in the habit of meeting in Peter Pan Land, or, when it rained, at the National Gallery. When young Orde appeared at luncheon on Sundays Mr. Lawrence gave him port from the wood.

Mr. Hemingway, for his part, also regarded his sister’s son with detachment, because he had detested Victor’s father.

Victor summed up the situation :

“ Your father, darlingest, and my uncle are not interested in the deserving poor, but in the preserving rich. I made nine pounds eleven shillings and fourpence last week. What does that work out *per annum* ? ”

Not being a lightning calculator, Nancy replied, elusively :

“ If it were a fixed income——”

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

It wasn't. Victor admitted that no man could keep his finger upon the pulse of a crank public. A profitable sale of a giraffe fell through, simply because the giraffe—as Mr. Zamrach put it—“up and died.”

Finally, a remunerative deal was effected in rattlesnakes. In the Land of the Bone Dry, rattlesnakes (for some inscrutable reason) are often exhibited in drug stores. Presumably, the curiosity which a deadly snake provokes leads to the sale of medicinal whisky, with the wise injunction: “Better before than after the bite.” Anyway, an Englishman who had visited California conceived the idea of displaying rattlesnakes in his drug-store window as being more likely to attract post-war customers than the purple jars beloved by Rosamund. Victor bought the rattlesnakes and promised to deliver them, safe and sound, to the purchaser.

At this moment Fortune ceased smiling upon young Mr. Orde.

Victor carried the rattlesnakes in a small hamper from Zamrach's to Old Square before ten. His uncle and Mr. Batson always left the office upon the stroke of five. At five-thirty Victor had promised to deliver the snakes to the druggist. That gentleman had provided a superb plate-glass tank and a commissariat department, including frogs and mice.

Victor hid the hamper in his own small room. At two, when Mr. Hemingway passed into his room, which adjoined Victor's, our hero left Old Square, returning in high spirits at a quarter to three. During the luncheon interval he met a client by appointment, and sold to him a kangaroo. More, this new client had a friend who wanted a platypus. Victor recklessly promised to supply the strange beast.

“Can't quote market price off-hand because there is no steady demand for platypi. To a friend of yours I shall shave the price if possible.”

Dew of the Sea

Passing through the narrow passage where Binks polished up his capacity for lying with such light fiction as tickled his palate, Victor noticed that Binks looked "queer." Victor, being a quarter of an hour late, asked hurriedly :

"Has my uncle asked for me?"

"No, Mr. Orde. 'Is Grice the Dook o' Glastonbury is with your uncle."

As Binks spoke, Mr. Batson summoned Binks. Victor walked into his room, and before tackling clerical work took a glance at the hamper.

The lid was up. The hamper was empty!

Even by the unco guid Victor will be held blameless for uttering one word :

"Damn!"

He said no more. He realized that a vocabulary acquired in the trenches could not do the subject justice.

The room—Victor called it a hutch—was very small. Within half a minute he knew that the snakes must be looked for elsewhere. The vagabonds might be in his uncle's room, where they would find warmth and good cover.

He heard voices.

The Duke of Glastonbury was Mr. Hemingway's most distinguished client. Like the unnamed marquess, he, too, entrusted his family solicitor with affairs which a lesser magnate might have attended to himself. The Duke was West Country in character, temperament, and appearance. It was said of his father that the particular housemaid who had the privilege of making the ducal bed had to wear white kid gloves before she was permitted to touch the ducal sheets.

A loud voice from the sanctum exclaimed in genial tones :

"What did you drink at luncheon, old fellow?"

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

The next moment his uncle's bell tinkled: Victor always answered Mr. Hemingway's bell.

He opened the door between the two rooms and hurried in. Upon a massive desk stood his uncle; lying back in an easy chair and laughing uproariously was the Duke.

Victor had a nodding acquaintance, no more, with his Grace.

"I say, my boy, your good uncle says that he has seen a snake in Old Square—at three in the afternoon——!"

"I *have* seen a snake," said Mr. Hemingway, in trembling accents.

Victor guessed that his uncle's solidly constructed mind was in ruins beneath ducal ridicule. Obviously his Grace of Glastonbury believed that a family solicitor of hitherto unblemished reputation saw snakes that were not. Mr. Hemingway had no tincture of Hibernian blood in his veins, but the Duke's Homeric laughter gave birth to a bull.

"If there isn't a snake in this room, I'll eat it."

Victor collated the trembling tones of Mr. Hemingway with the wobbly lips of Binks. He knew his Binks was inquisitive to the *n*th degree. Binks had seen an articulated clerk arrive that morning with a mysterious hamper. Binks, between one and two, must have opened that hamper. What he beheld inside it had prevented him from closing it again. Probably Binks had fled.

"A s-s-snake?" stammered Victor.

Mr. Hemingway continued, in an angry voice:

"I saw a serpent and the serpent saw me. It vanished. It looked a deadly serpent."

Victor bowed deprecatingly.

He was collecting his wits and trying, at the same time, to control his risible muscles.

"Where did you see the snake, uncle?"

"I saw a flat, hideous head and part of the body at the edge of those tin boxes."

Dew of the Sea

Victor said suavely, "Let me hunt for this snake."

"You are a brave young man, Victor. Take my cane—which is in that corner—and kill the reptile."

Reluctantly, Victor grasped a malacca cane. Mr. Zamrach had said a few enlightening words concerning rattlesnakes. In December they are in a lethargic condition, but become lively as eels when warmed up. Not far from the tin boxes stood the radiator.

Victor, poking with the cane, dislodged some papers—and jumped hastily. He had heard a sound that puts fear into most men and into all beasts: the warning rattle of *crotalus horridus* coiled and poised for the lashing stroke.

"Ha, ha!" roared the Duke. "A rattlesnake, b' Jove! You were right, Hemingway. I beg pardon—abjectly."

"Not another word, your Grace, I entreat."

From his chair the Duke issued commands.

"You are quite safe, my boy. A rattlesnake can only strike about eighteen inches. Bang him on the head!"

Victor could see the head and vibrant tail. He knew that his number was up as an articulated clerk, and into his mind crept the invincible determination to deliver the goods to his purchaser—alive.

"I'm sorry," he said calmly. "These snakes are mine."

"Good God!" exclaimed the Duke. "How many are there in this damned room?"

Mr. Hemingway winced. He told himself that he was damned together with his room.

"There are only two, your Grace. I said they were mine, but really they belong to a friend who bought them from me. By some mischance they have got out of the hamper which held them. If my uncle and your Grace will go into my room for a moment, I will try and put them back into the hamper."

Now the Duke was a sportsman who acclaimed pluck in gentle and simple. He glanced from the open, ingenuous

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

face of the young man to the thunderous, crinkled countenance of Mr. Hemingway, who found his tongue and wagged it savagely :

“ We will leave you, Victor, with your pets. Be good enough to remove them and yourself from my premises. You are either a fool or a madman, and I have no use for either.”

“ But I want to see him catch 'em,” said the Duke.

Majestically, Mr. Hemingway descended from his desk and crossed the room.

“ That is as your Grace pleases.” He went out.

The Duke said genially :

“ Foot-and-mouth disease has stopped hunting in my country, but this is more exciting than any fox-chase. Eleu in, my boy ! ”

Victor approached the tin boxes. He could not see the snake because it had wriggled away.

“ Tally ho ! ”

Two snakes broke cover, glided across the carpet, and found harbourage behind a curtain.

“ We wind 'em—we wind 'em ! ” shouted an M.F.H.

An unmistakable smell of snake was wafted to ducal nostrils.

“ Kill 'em, and have done with it.”

“ I can't afford to kill them, your Grace.”

“ You can't catch 'em alive, my boy. I lay six to four against you.”

“ In pounds, your Grace ? ”

The Duke nodded.

“ Done,” said Victor.

“ And, b' Jove, I'll whip in, if you want me.”

“ Your Grace's valuable life must not be imperilled.”

“ Hate looking on at rare sport,” growled the magnate, “ but I never interfere with the huntsman.”

Victor's next move was to empty a large waste-paper basket. Then he looked pleadingly at the Duke.

Dew of the Sea

“ If your Grace would stand upon your chair. I'm going to bolt the rattlers.”

“ You trust me to make an emergency exit if necessary.”

“ Must separate 'em, your Grace.”

He poked at the curtain. The snakes wriggled out from beneath it. One coiled and rattled. In an instant it was under the waste-paper basket.

“ Who-whoop ! ” shouted the Duke.

At this moment Mr. Batson appeared. He knew that the Duke of Glastonbury was with the senior partner, and he knew that his Grace, upon occasion, even in Old Square, amused himself by making what Mr. Batson called “ hunting noises.” But the ear-shattering *Who-whoop !* had been too much for him.

The Duke, beholding Mr. Batson's cherubic face and two interrogatory eyebrows, yelled out :

“ 'Ware snake, Batson ! ”

Petrified with astonishment, Mr. Batson stood still. Victor asked a question :

“ May I borrow, sir, your waste-paper basket ? ”

At this moment Mr. Batson saw the uncaptured snake. Apparently business of urgent private importance constrained him to retire into his own room with undignified haste. The Duke grinned.

“ Not exactly a thruster, what ? ”

“ A skirter,” admitted Victor. The Duke laughed ; he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

“ Hoick forrard ! Hoick forrard ! ”

“ This will serve,” said Victor. He took from his uncle's desk an immense basket that held the most important papers. He turned it upside down. The last will and testament of a bishop fell upon the floor.

“ Who-whoop ! ” yelled the Duke.

Victor had captured snake number two by inciting it to coil and then, as before, deftly popping the basket over it.

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

“ Good boy ! ” said his Grace ; “ but—if you lift those baskets, the varmints’ll diddle you.”

Victor sought for and found a large piece of cardboard. He slipped this under snake and basket, and turned the basket right side up.

“ I lose six pounds,” said the Duke cheerfully.

“ They’re not in the hamper yet.”

It was past four when they were in the hamper.

IV

Then the Duke, in the presence of Mr. Hemingway, asked the inevitable question :

“ Why is your nephew in the snake business ? ”

Mr. Hemingway, scowling at Victor, replied curtly :

“ Let us hope that it will keep him out of a lunatic asylum or the workhouse.”

“ It’s a long story,” said Victor, noting a twinkle in the ducal eye. “ I—I suppose, your Grace, I inherit from my uncle aptitudes as a middleman.”

“ A middleman ? ”

“ What an expression to apply to me ! ” exclaimed Mr. Hemingway.

“ You buy and sell for his Grace, uncle. I have been buying and selling strange beasts and birds and reptiles for my clients. I’m making a decent income at it. You see, I want to marry. I can’t marry upon the small salary I earn here and the modest allowance made to me by my mother.”

“ Marry ? ” gasped Mr. Hemingway. “ What next ? ”

“ I might, sir, have to provide for a small family.”

Mr. Hemingway looked shocked, but the Duke laughed.

“ Come, come, old friend, this nephew of yours is a corker. You ought to be proud of him. You ought—forgive me for saying so—to give the boy promotion for

Dew of the Sea

this afternoon's work. He would infuse 'drive' into a slightly lymphatic business. I'd back him to buy and sell for me. Which reminds me."

He pulled out a bundle of Bradburys and handed six of them to Victor.

"You are tipping my nephew for turning loose rattlesnakes in my room!"

"I'm settling a bet, Hemingway. Romance and rattlers! What a combination!" He glanced at his watch. "I'm late for an appointment. No matter. I've had a rare bit of fun. Now, my boy, I'm up at Glastonbury House for a couple of days. I'm dining alone at the Buskin to-night at eight. Will you join me and spin the yarn from beginning to end?"

"With the greatest pleasure," said Victor.

The Duke bustled away. Mr. Hemingway stared thoughtfully at his nephew, beholding him with clearer vision.

"Whom do you want to marry, Victor?"

"Miss Nancy Lawrence. Her father doesn't know yet that I want to marry his daughter. He regards me, sir, as you do, with indifferent eyes. I have not made good with him, but I shall."

Mr. Hemingway nodded, but his glance, wandering from Victor's face, rested upon the hamper.

"Take that hamper to your—*client* at once."

Victor tucked the hamper under his arm and started for the door.

"Wait! Have you—a—the right clothes to—to wear to-night?"

"The good old dinner jacket, uncle. Or would you advise—a swallow-tail?"

Mr. Hemingway grunted:

"Cap and bells and motley would be more fitting than either. Off with you!"

"Am I to come back, sir?"

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

“ Under all the circumstances, do you want to come back ? ”

“ I want to make good here.”

“ You can come back to-morrow.”

V

The hamper was delivered within half an hour. Victor, knowing the habits of Nancy's father, who played bridge at his club after leaving his office, decided that a cup of tea from Nancy's hands would be very refreshing. Nancy happened to be alone. Victor recited his adventures, and the young lady was thrilled. Having a vivid imagination, she envisaged Victor bitten to death by a brace of rattlesnakes and expiring in agony upon a well-worn body Brussels carpet.

“ I must tell daddy.”

At this moment daddy appeared, not in the best of tempers. He greeted young Orde with studied coldness.

“ Why aren't you playing bridge, dad ? ”

“ Don't ask silly questions ! I'm not playing bridge because I am here.”

“ Victor will tell you a funny story about rattlesnakes.”

“ Um ! I was not aware, Nancy, that your slight acquaintance with Mr. Orde justified the use of his Christian name.”

Nancy, slightly piqued, retorted smartly :

“ If it were slight, it wouldn't.”

Mr. Lawrence stared at sparkling eyes. Wisely he said nothing. Nancy handed him a cup of tea. Victor, encouraged by the pressure of a small foot under the table, told his amazing tale for the second time. Somehow it improved in the telling. Mr. Lawrence blinked, smiled, and finally laughed.

“ Of course, your uncle has given you the sack, young man ? ”

Dew of the Sea

“ Not yet, sir. You see, the distinguished client who was with him is the Duke of Glastonbury.”

Mr. Lawrence was visibly impressed.

“ But that puts the lid on, what ? ”

“ No, sir ; the odd combination of rattlesnakes and romance caught the Duke’s fancy.”

“ In telling the story to me, Orde, you left out what seems to have challenged the Duke’s interest—the romance. Romance appeals to me, although I’m not a Duke. Where does the romance come in ? ”

“ Here ! ” replied Victor.

“ I’m the romance, daddy,” cooed Nancy.

All middlemen, having to cater for tastes differing from their own, acquire *expertise* in realizing what “ the other fellow ” wants. It had never occurred to Mr. Lawrence that his daughter could want Victor Orde. Face to face with the fact he accepted it. He asked, reasonably :

“ Why am I shell-shocked as I’m drinking my tea ? ”

“ We wished to spare your feelings as long as possible, daddy.”

“ I knew, sir, that as an articled clerk I appeared to you negligible. Now—as a middleman, like yourself—we meet on more equal terms.”

“ What damned cheek ! ”

“ Pardon me, Mr. Lawrence. My chief asset is not cheek, but initiative. The secret of success in business is to humour human nature. Give a customer what he wants, and shave the price. Don’t try to impose your taste and predilections on him or her—particularly HER.”

Nancy smiled beguilingly at her father.

“ Yes, daddy. For instance, that anæmic young man whom you have been asking to dine here lately finds favour with you, but not with me. He is not like your best Burgundy. He lacks what you call—quality, colour and vinosity.”

Romance, Rattlesnakes and Middlemen

Mr. Lawrence pulled himself together.

"I think," he said stiffly, "that I must ask you, Orde, to leave us."

"Certainly, Mr. Lawrence; but may I come back?"

Nancy murmured, very articulately:

"Victor is dining with the Duke of Glastonbury. He might come back after dinner."

"You—you are dining with the Duke?"

"Yes, sir. At the Buskin."

"I should like to measure Victor's head, daddy, after dinner, just to see if it is a wee bit swelled."

"I sell wine to the Buskin," said Mr. Lawrence. "If the Duke says anything about the port——"

"I shall tell his Grace," smiled Victor, "from whose cellars it came."

Mr. Lawrence made a gesture which might mean anything or nothing.

"*A tout à l'heure*, Victor," said Nancy.

VI

Within a week his Grace of Glastonbury bought a large parcel of vintage port from Mr. Lawrence. Victor and Nancy are furnishing a flat on the instalment plan. Messrs. Hemingway and Batson have taken a very junior partner and lost an articulated clerk.

The Duke says that he is a middleman.