

CHAPTER II

THE EXILED FAN

London brooded under a grey sky. There had been rain in the night, and the trees were still dripping. Presently, however, there appeared in the laden haze a watery patch of blue: and through this crevice in the clouds the sun, diffidently at first but with gradually increasing confidence, peeped down on the fashionable and exclusive turf of Grosvenor Square. Stealing across the square, its rays reached the massive stone walls of Drexdale House, until recently the London residence of the earl of that name; then, passing through the window of the breakfast-room, played lightly on the partially bald head of Mr. Bingley Crocker, late of New York in the United States of America, as he bent over his morning paper. Mrs. Bingley Crocker, busy across the table reading her mail, the rays did not touch. Had they done so, she would have rung for Bayliss, the butler, to come and lower the shade, for she endured liberties neither from Man nor from Nature.

Mr. Crocker was about fifty years of age, clean-shaven and of a comfortable stoutness. He was frowning as he read. His smooth, good-humoured face wore an expression which might have been disgust, perplexity, or a blend of both. His wife, on the other hand, was looking happy. She extracted the substance from her

correspondence with swift glances of her compelling eyes, just as she would have extracted guilty secrets from Bingley, if he had had any. This was a woman who, like her sister Nesta, had been able all her life to accomplish more with a glance than other women with recrimination and threat. It had been a popular belief among his friends that her late husband, the well-known Pittsburg millionaire G. G. van Brunt, had been in the habit of automatically confessing all if he merely caught the eye of her photograph on his dressing table.

From the growing pile of opened envelopes Mrs. Crocker looked up, a smile softening the firm line of her lips.

"A card from Lady Corstorphine, Bingley, for her at-home on the twenty-ninth."

Mr. Crocker, still absorbed, snorted absently.

"One of the most exclusive hostesses in England. . . . She has influence with the right sort of people. Her brother, the Duke of Devizes, is the Premier's oldest friend."

"Uh?"

"The Duchess of Axminster has written to ask me to look after a stall at her bazaar for the Indigent Daughters of the Clergy."

"Huh?"

"Bingley! You aren't listening. What is that you are reading?"

Mr. Crocker tore himself from the paper.

"This? Oh, I was looking at a report of that cricket game you made me go and see yesterday."

"Oh? I am glad you have begun to take an interest in cricket. It is simply a social necessity in England. Why you ever made such a fuss about taking it up, I can't think. You used to be so fond of watching baseball and cricket is just the same thing."

A close observer would have marked a deepening of the look of pain on Mr. Crocker's face. Women say this sort of thing carelessly, with no wish to wound: but that makes it none the less hard to bear.

From the hall outside came faintly the sound of the telephone, then the measured tones of Bayliss answering it. Mr. Crocker returned to his paper.

Bayliss entered.

"Lady Corstorphine desires to speak to you on the telephone, madam."

Half-way to the door Mrs. Crocker paused, as if recalling something that had slipped her memory.

"Is Mr. James getting up, Bayliss?"

"I believe not, madam. I am informed by one of the house-maids who passed his door a short time back that there were no sounds."

Mrs. Crocker left the room. Bayliss, preparing to follow her example, was arrested by an exclamation from the table.

"Say!"

His master's voice.

"Say, Bayliss, come here a minute. Want to ask you something."

The butler approached the table. It seemed to him that his employer was not looking quite himself this morning. There was something a trifle wild, a little haggard, about his expression. He had remarked on it earlier in the morning in the Servants' Hall.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Crocker's ailment was a perfectly simple one. He was suffering from one of those acute spasms of home-sickness, which invariably racked him in the earlier Summer months. Ever since his marriage five years previously and his simultaneous removal from his native land he had been a chronic victim to the complaint. The symptoms grew less acute in Winter and Spring, but from May onward he suffered severely.

Poets have dealt feelingly with the emotions of practically every variety except one. They have sung of Ruth, of Israel in bondage, of slaves pining for their native Africa, and of the miner's dream of home. But the sorrows of the baseball bug, compelled by fate to live three thousand miles away from the Polo Grounds, have been neglected in song. Bingley Crocker was such a one, and in Summer his agonies were awful. He pined away in a country where they said "Well played, sir!" when they meant "at-a-boy!"

"Bayliss, do you play cricket?"

"I am a little past the age, sir. In my younger days . . ."

"Do you understand it?"

"Yes, sir. I frequently spend an afternoon at Lord's or the Oval when there is a good match."

Many who enjoyed a merely casual acquaintance with the butler would have looked on this as an astonishingly unexpected revelation of humanity in Bayliss, but Mr. Crocker was not surprised. To him, from the very beginning, Bayliss had been a man and a brother who was always willing to suspend his duties in order to answer questions dealing with the thousand and one problems which the social life of England presented. Mr. Crocker's mind had adjusted itself with difficulty to the niceties of class distinction: and, while he had cured himself of his early tendency to address the butler as "Bill," he never failed to consult him as man to man in his moments of perplexity. Bayliss was always eager to be of assistance. He liked Mr. Crocker. True, his manner might have struck a more sensitive man than his employer as a shade too closely resembling that of an indulgent father towards a son who was not quite right in the head: but it had genuine affection in it.

Mr. Crocker picked up his paper and folded it back at the sporting page, pointing with a stubby forefinger.

"Well, what does all this mean? I've kept out of watching cricket since I landed in England, but yesterday they got the poison needle to work and took me off to see Surrey play Kent at that place Lord's where you say you go sometimes."

"I was there yesterday, sir. A very exciting game."

"Exciting? How do you make that out? I sat in the bleachers all afternoon, waiting for something to break loose. Doesn't anything ever happen at cricket?"

The butler winced a little, but managed to smile a tolerant smile. This man, he reflected, was but an American and as such more to be pitied than censured. He endeavoured to explain.

"It was a sticky wicket yesterday, sir, owing to the rain."

"Eh?"

"The wicket was sticky, sir."

"Come again."

"I mean that the reason why the game yesterday struck you as slow was that the wicket--I should say the turf--was sticky--that is to say wet. Sticky is the technical term, sir. When the wicket is sticky, the batsmen are obliged to exercise a great deal of caution, as the stickiness of the wicket enables the bowlers to make the ball turn more sharply in either direction as it strikes the turf than when the wicket is not sticky."

"That's it, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks for telling me."

"Not at all, sir."

Mr. Crocker pointed to the paper.

"Well, now, this seems to be the box-score of the game we saw yesterday. If you can make sense out of that, go to it."

The passage on which his finger rested was headed "Final Score," and ran as follows:

SURREY

First Innings

Hayward, c Wooley, b Carr	67
Hobbs, run out	0
Hayes, st Huish, b Fielder	12
Ducat, b Fielder	33
Harrison, not out	11
Sandham, not out	6
Extras	10

Total (for four wickets) 139

Bayliss inspected the cipher gravely.

"What is it you wish me to explain, sir?"

"Why, the whole thing. What's it all about?"

"It's perfectly simple, sir. Surrey won the toss, and took first knock. Hayward and Hobbs were the opening pair. Hayward called Hobbs for a short run, but the latter was unable to get across and was thrown out by mid-on. Hayes was the next man in. He went out of his ground and was stumped. Ducat and Hayward made a capital stand considering the stickiness of the wicket, until Ducat was bowled by a good length off-break and Hayward caught at second slip off a googly. Then Harrison and Sandham played out time."

Mr. Crocker breathed heavily through his nose.

"Yes!" he said. "Yes! I had an idea that was it. But I think I'd like to have it once again, slowly. Start with these figures. What does that sixty-seven mean, opposite Hayward's name?"

"He made sixty-seven runs, sir."

"Sixty-seven! In one game?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why, Home-Run Baker couldn't do it!"

"I am not familiar with Mr. Baker, sir."

"I suppose you've never seen a ball-game?"

"Ball-game, sir?"

"A baseball game?"

"Never, sir."

"Then, Bill," said Mr. Crocker, reverting in his emotion to the bad habit of his early London days, "you haven't lived. See here!"

Whatever vestige of respect for class distinctions Mr. Crocker had managed to preserve during the opening stages of the interview now definitely disappeared. His eyes shone wildly and he snorted like a war-horse. He clutched the butler by the sleeve and drew him closer to the table, then began to move forks,

spoons, cups, and even the contents of his plate about the cloth with an energy little short of feverish.

"Bayliss!"

"Sir?"

"Watch!" said Mr. Crocker, with the air of an excitable high priest about to initiate a novice into the Mysteries.

He removed a roll from the basket.

"You see this roll? That's the home plate. This spoon is first base. Where I'm putting this cup is second. This piece of bacon is third. There's your diamond for you. Very well, then. These lumps of sugar are the infielders and the outfielders. Now we're ready. Batter up? He stands here. Catcher behind him. Umps behind catcher."

"Umps, I take it, sir, is what we would call the umpire?"

"Call him anything you like. It's part of the game. Now here's the box, where I've put this dab of marmalade, and here's the pitcher, winding up."

"The pitcher would be equivalent to our bowler?"

"I guess so, though why you should call him a bowler gets past me."

"The box, then, is the bowler's wicket?"

"Have it your own way. Now pay attention. Play ball! Pitcher's winding up. Put it over, Mike, put it over! Some speed, kid! Here it comes, right in the groove. Bing! Batter slams it and streaks for first. Outfielder--this lump of sugar--boots it. Bonehead! Batter touches second. Third? No! Get back! Can't be done. Play it safe. Stick around the sack, old pal. Second batter up. Pitcher getting something on the ball now besides the cover. Whiffs him. Back to the bench, Cyril! Third batter up. See him rub his hands in the dirt. Watch this kid. He's good! He lets two alone, then slams the next right on the nose. Whizzes around to second. First guy, the one we left on second, comes home for one run. That's a game! Take it from me, Bill, that's a game!"

Somewhat overcome with the energy with which he had flung himself into his lecture, Mr. Crocker sat down and refreshed himself with cold coffee.

"Quite an interesting game," said Bayliss. "But I find, now that you have explained it, sir, that it is familiar to me, though I have always known it under another name. It is played a great

deal in this country."

Mr. Crocker started to his feet.

"It is? And I've been five years here without finding it out!

When's the next game scheduled?"

"It is known in England as Rounders, sir. Children play it with a soft ball and a racquet, and derive considerable enjoyment from it. I had never heard of it before as a pastime for adults."

Two shocked eyes stared into the butler's face.

"Children?" The word came in a whisper.

"A racquet?"

"Yes, sir."

"You--you didn't say a soft ball?"

"Yes, sir."

A sort of spasm seemed to convulse Mr. Crocker. He had lived five years in England, but not till this moment had he realised to the full how utterly alone he was in an alien land. Fate had placed

him, bound and helpless, in a country where they called baseball Rounders and played it with a soft ball.

He sank back into his chair, staring before him. And as he sat the wall seemed to melt and he was gazing upon a green field, in the centre of which a man in a grey uniform was beginning a Salome dance. Watching this person with a cold and suspicious eye, stood another uniformed man, holding poised above his shoulder a sturdy club. Two Masked Marvels crouched behind him in attitudes of watchful waiting. On wooden seats all around sat a vast multitude of shirt-sleeved spectators, and the air was full of voices.

One voice detached itself from the din.

"Pea-nuts! Get y'r pea-nuts!"

Something that was almost a sob shook Bingley Crocker's ample frame. Bayliss the butler gazed down upon him with concern. He was sure the master was unwell.

The case of Mr. Bingley Crocker was one that would have provided an admirable "instance" for a preacher seeking to instil into an impecunious and sceptical flock the lesson that money does not of necessity bring with it happiness. And poetry has crystallised his position in the following stanza.

An exile from home splendour dazzles in vain.
Oh, give me my lowly thatched cottage again;
The birds singing gaily, that came at my call,
Give me them, and that peace of mind dearer than all.

Mr. Crocker had never lived in a thatched cottage, nor had his relations with the birds of his native land ever reached the stage of intimacy indicated by the poet; but substitute "Lambs Club" for the former and "members" for the latter, and the parallel becomes complete.

Until the time of his second marriage Bingley Crocker had been an actor, a snapper-up of whatever small character-parts the gods provided. He had an excellent disposition, no money, and one son, a young man of twenty-one. For forty-five years he had lived a hand-to-mouth existence in which his next meal had generally come as a pleasant surprise: and then, on an Atlantic liner, he met the widow of G. G. van Brunt, the sole heiress to that magnate's immense fortune.

What Mrs. van Brunt could have seen in Bingley Crocker to cause her to single him out from all the world passes comprehension: but the eccentricities of Cupid are commonplace. It were best to shun examination into first causes and stick to results. The swift romance began and reached its climax in the ten days which

it took one of the smaller Atlantic liners to sail from Liverpool to New York. Mr. Crocker was on board because he was returning with a theatrical company from a failure in London, Mrs. van Brunt because she had been told that the slow boats were the steadiest. They began the voyage as strangers and ended it as an engaged couple--the affair being expedited, no doubt, by the fact that, even if it ever occurred to Bingley to resist the onslaught on his bachelor peace, he soon realised the futility of doing so, for the cramped conditions of ship-board intensified the always overwhelming effects of his future bride's determined nature.

The engagement was received in a widely differing spirit by the only surviving blood-relations of the two principals. Jimmy, Mr. Crocker's son, on being informed that his father had plighted his troth to the widow of a prominent millionaire, displayed the utmost gratification and enthusiasm, and at a little supper which he gave by way of farewell to a few of his newspaper comrades and which lasted till six in the morning, when it was broken up by the flying wedge of waiters for which the selected restaurant is justly famous, joyfully announced that work and he would from then on be total strangers. He alluded in feeling terms to the Providence which watches over good young men and saves them from the blighting necessity of offering themselves in the flower of their golden youth as human sacrifices to the Moloch of capitalistic greed: and, having commiserated with his guests in that a similar stroke of luck had not happened to each of them,

advised them to drown their sorrows in drink. Which they did.

Far different was the attitude of Mrs. Crocker's sister, Nesta Pett. She entirely disapproved of the proposed match. At least, the fact that in her final interview with her sister she described the bridegroom-to-be as a wretched mummer, a despicable fortune-hunter, a broken-down tramp, and a sneaking, grafting confidence-trickster lends colour to the supposition that she was not a warm supporter of it. She agreed wholeheartedly with Mrs. Crocker's suggestion that they should never speak to each other again as long as they lived: and it was immediately after this that the latter removed husband Bingley, step-son Jimmy, and all her other goods and chattels to London, where they had remained ever since. Whenever Mrs. Crocker spoke of America now, it was in tones of the deepest dislike and contempt. Her friends were English, and every year more exclusively of England's aristocracy. She intended to become a leading figure in London Society, and already her progress had been astonishing. She knew the right people, lived in the right square, said the right things, and thought the right thoughts: and in the Spring of her third year had succeeded in curing Bingley of his habit of beginning his remarks with the words "Say, lemme tell ya something." Her progress, in short, was beginning to assume the aspect of a walk-over.

Against her complete contentment and satisfaction only one thing

militated. That was the behaviour of her step-son, Jimmy.

It was of Jimmy that she spoke when, having hung the receiver on its hook, she returned to the breakfast-room. Bayliss had silently withdrawn, and Mr. Crocker was sitting in sombre silence at the table.

"A most fortunate thing has happened, Bingley," she said. "It was most kind of dear Lady Corstorphine to ring me up. It seems that her nephew, Lord Percy Whipple, is back in England. He has been in Ireland for the past three years, on the staff of the Lord Lieutenant, and only arrived in London yesterday afternoon. Lady Corstorphine has promised to arrange a meeting between him and James. I particularly want them to be friends."

"Eugenia," said Mr. Crocker in a hollow voice, "do you know they call baseball Rounders over here, and children play it with a soft ball?"

"James is becoming a serious problem. It is absolutely necessary that he should make friends with the right kind of young men."

"And a racquet," said Mr. Crocker.

"Please listen to what I am saying, Bingley. I am talking about James. There is a crude American strain in him which seems to

grow worse instead of better. I was lunching with the Delafields at the Carlton yesterday, and there, only a few tables away, was James with an impossible young man in appalling clothes. It was outrageous that James should have been seen in public at all with such a person. The man had a broken nose and talked through it. He was saying in a loud voice that made everybody turn round something about his left-scissors hook--whatever that may have been. I discovered later that he was a low professional pugilist from New York--a man named Spike Dillon, I think Captain Wroxton said. And Jimmy was giving him lunch--at the Carlton!"

Mr. Crocker said nothing. Constant practice had made him an adept at saying nothing when his wife was talking.

"James must be made to realise his responsibilities. I shall have to speak to him. I was hearing only the other day of a most deserving man, extremely rich and lavishly generous in his contributions to the party funds, who was only given a knighthood, simply because he had a son who had behaved in a manner that could not possibly be overlooked. The present Court is extraordinarily strict in its views. James cannot be too careful. A certain amount of wildness in a young man is quite proper in the best set, provided that he is wild in the right company. Every one knows that young Lord Datchet was ejected from the Empire Music-Hall on Boat-Race night every year during his residence at Oxford University, but nobody minds. The family

treats it as a joke. But James has such low tastes. Professional pugilists! I believe that many years ago it was not unfashionable for young men in Society to be seen about with such persons, but those days are over. I shall certainly speak to James. He cannot afford to call attention to himself in any way. That breach-of-promise case of his three years ago, is, I hope and trust, forgotten, but the slightest slip on his part might start the papers talking about it again, and that would be fatal. The eventual successor to a title must be quite as careful as--"

It was not, as has been hinted above, the usual practice of Mr. Crocker to interrupt his wife when she was speaking, but he did it now.

"Say!"

Mrs. Crocker frowned.

"I wish, Bingley--and I have told you so often--that you would not begin your sentences with the word 'Say!' It is such a revolting Americanism. Suppose some day when you are addressing the House of Lords you should make a slip like that! The papers would never let you hear the end of it."

Mr. Crocker was swallowing convulsively, as if testing his larynx with a view to speech. Like Saul of Tarsus, he had been stricken

dumb by the sudden bright light which his wife's words had caused to flash upon him. Frequently during his sojourn in London he had wondered just why Eugenia had settled there in preference to her own country. It was not her wont to do things without an object, yet until this moment he had been unable to fathom her motives. Even now it seemed almost incredible. And yet what meaning would her words have other than the monstrous one which had smitten him as a blackjack?

"Say--I mean, Eugenia--you don't want--you aren't trying--you aren't working to--you haven't any idea of trying to get them to make me a Lord, have you?"

"It is what I have been working for all these years!"

"But--but why? Why? That's what I want to know. Why?"

Mrs. Crocker's fine eyes glittered.

"I will tell you why, Bingley. Just before we were married I had a talk with my sister Nesta. She was insufferably offensive. She referred to you in terms which I shall never forgive. She affected to look down on you, to think that I was marrying beneath me. So I am going to make you an English peer and send Nesta a newspaper clipping of the Birthday Honours with your name in it, if I have to keep working till I die! Now you know!"

Silence fell. Mr. Crocker drank cold coffee. His wife stared with gleaming eyes into the glorious future.

"Do you mean that I shall have to stop on here till they make me a lord?" said Mr. Crocker limply.

"Yes."

"Never go back to America?"

"Not till we have succeeded."

"Oh Gee! Oh Gosh! Oh Hell!" said Mr. Crocker, bursting the bonds of years.

Mrs. Crocker though resolute, was not unkindly. She made allowances for her husband's state of mind. She was willing to permit even American expletives during the sinking-in process of her great idea, much as a broad-minded cowboy might listen indulgently to the squealing of a mustang during the branding process. Docility and obedience would be demanded of him later, but not till the first agony had abated. She spoke soothingly to him.

"I am glad we have had this talk, Bingley. It is best that you

should know. It will help you to realise your responsibilities. And that brings me back to James. Thank goodness Lord Percy Whipple is in town. He is about James' age, and from what Lady Corstorphine tells me will be an ideal friend for him. You understand who he is, of course? The second son of the Duke of Devizes, the Premier's closest friend, the man who can practically dictate the Birthday Honours. If James and Lord Percy can only form a close friendship, our battle will be as good as won. It will mean everything. Lady Corstorphine has promised to arrange a meeting. In the meantime, I will speak to James and warn him to be more careful."

Mr. Crocker had produced a stump of pencil from his pocket and was writing on the table-cloth.

Lord Crocker

Lord Bingley Crocker

Lord Crocker of Crocker

The Marquis of Crocker

Baron Crocker

Bingley, first Viscount Crocker

He blanched as he read the frightful words. A sudden thought stung him.

"Eugenia!"

"Well?"

"What will the boys at the Lambs say?"

"I am not interested," replied his wife, "in the boys at the Lambs."

"I thought you wouldn't be," said the future baron gloomily.