

## CHAPTER III

### FAMILY JARS

It is a peculiarity of the human mind that, with whatever apprehension it may be regarding the distant future, it must return after a while to face the minor troubles of the future that is immediate. The prospect of a visit to the dentist this afternoon causes us to forget for the moment the prospect of total ruin next year. Mr. Crocker, therefore, having tortured himself for about a quarter of an hour with his meditations on the subject of titles, was jerked back to a more imminent calamity than the appearance of his name in the Birthday Honours--the fact that in all probability he would be taken again this morning to watch the continuation of that infernal cricket-match, and would be compelled to spend the greater part of to-day, as he had spent the greater part of yesterday, bored to the verge of dissolution in the pavilion at Lord's.

One gleam of hope alone presented itself. Like baseball, this pastime of cricket was apparently affected by rain, if there had been enough of it. He had an idea that there had been a good deal of rain in the night, but had there been sufficient to cause the teams of Surrey and Kent to postpone the second instalment of their serial struggle? He rose from the table and went out into the hall. It was his purpose to sally out into Grosvenor Square

and examine the turf in its centre with the heel of his shoe, in order to determine the stickiness or non-stickiness of the wicket. He moved towards the front door, hoping for the best, and just as he reached it the bell rang.

One of the bad habits of which his wife had cured Mr. Crocker in the course of the years was the habit of going and answering doors. He had been brought up in surroundings where every man was his own door-keeper, and it had been among his hardest tasks to learn the lesson that the perfect gentleman does not open doors but waits for the appropriate menial to come along and do it for him. He had succeeded at length in mastering this great truth, and nowadays seldom offended. But this morning his mind was clouded by his troubles, and instinct, allaying itself with opportunity, was too much for him. His fingers had been on the handle when the ring came, so he turned it.

At the top of the steps which connect the main entrance of Drexdale House with the sidewalk three persons were standing. One was a tall and formidably handsome woman in the early forties whose appearance seemed somehow oddly familiar. The second was a small, fat, blobby, bulging boy who was chewing something. The third, lurking diffidently in the rear, was a little man of about Mr. Crocker's own age, grey-haired and thin with brown eyes that gazed meekly through rimless glasses.

Nobody could have been less obtrusive than this person, yet it was he who gripped Mr. Crocker's attention and caused that home-sick sufferer's heart to give an almost painful leap. For he was clothed in one of those roomy suits with square shoulders which to the seeing eye are as republican as the Stars and Stripes. His blunt-toed yellow shoes sang gaily of home. And his hat was not so much a hat as an effusive greeting from Gotham. A long time had passed since Mr. Crocker had set eyes upon a biped so exhilaratingly American, and rapture held him speechless, as one who after long exile beholds some landmark of his childhood.

The female member of the party took advantage of his dumbness--which, as she had not unnaturally mistaken him for the butler, she took for a silent and respectful query as to her business and wishes--to open the conversation.

"Is Mrs. Crocker at home? Please tell her that Mrs. Pett wishes to see her."

There was a rush and scurry in the corridors of Mr. Crocker's brain, as about six different thoughts tried to squash simultaneously into that main chamber where there is room for only one at a time. He understood now why this woman's appearance had seemed familiar. She was his wife's sister, and that same Nesta who was some day to be pulverised by the sight of his name in the Birthday Honours. He was profoundly thankful that she had

mistaken him for the butler. A chill passed through him as he pictured what would have been Eugenia's reception of the information that he had committed such a bourgeois solecism as opening the front door to Mrs. Pett of all people, who already despised him as a low vulgarian. There had been trouble enough when she had found him opening it a few weeks before to a mere collector of subscriptions for a charity. He perceived, with a clarity remarkable in view of the fact that the discovery of her identity had given him a feeling of physical dizziness, that at all costs he must foster this misapprehension on his sister-in-law's part.

Fortunately he was in a position to do so. He knew all about what butlers did and what they said on these occasions, for in his innocently curious way he had often pumped Bayliss on the subject. He bowed silently and led the way to the morning-room, followed by the drove of Petts: then, opening the door, stood aside to allow the procession to march past the given point.

"I will inform Mrs. Crocker that you are here, madam."

Mrs. Pett, shepherding the chewing child before her, passed into the room. In the light of her outspoken sentiments regarding her brother-in-law, it is curious to reflect that his manner at this, their first meeting, had deeply impressed her. After many months of smouldering revolt she had dismissed her own butler a day or

so before sailing for England, and for the first time envy of her sister Eugenia gripped her. She did not covet Eugenia's other worldly possessions, but she did grudge her this supreme butler.

Mr. Pett, meanwhile, had been trailing in the rear with a hunted expression on his face. He wore the unmistakable look of a man about to be present at a row between women, and only a wet cat in a strange back-yard bears itself with less jauntiness than a man faced by such a prospect. A millionaire several times over, Mr. Pett would cheerfully have given much of his wealth to have been elsewhere at that moment. Such was the agitated state of his mind that, when a hand was laid lightly upon his arm as he was about to follow his wife into the room, he started so violently that his hat flew out of his hand. He turned to meet the eyes of the butler who had admitted him to the house, fixed on his in an appealing stare.

"Who's leading in the pennant race?" said this strange butler in a feverish whisper.

It was a question, coming from such a source, which in another than Mr. Pett might well have provoked a blank stare of amazement. Such, however, is the almost superhuman intelligence and quickness of mind engendered by the study of America's national game that he answered without the slightest hesitation.

"Giants!"

"Wow!" said the butler.

No sense of anything strange or untoward about the situation came to mar the perfect joy of Mr. Pett, the overmastering joy of the baseball fan who in a strange land unexpectedly encounters a brother. He thrilled with a happiness which he had never hoped to feel that morning.

"No signs of them slumping?" enquired the butler.

"No. But you never can tell. It's early yet. I've seen those boys lead the league till the end of August and then be nosed out."

"True enough," said the butler sadly.

"Matty's in shape."

"He is? The old souper working well?"

"Like a machine. He shut out the Cubs the day before I sailed!"

"Fine!"

At this point an appreciation of the unusualness of the

proceedings began to steal upon Mr. Pett. He gaped at this surprising servitor.

"How on earth do you know anything about baseball?" he demanded.

The other seemed to stiffen. A change came over his whole appearance. He had the air of an actor who has remembered his part.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I trust I have not taken a liberty. I was at one time in the employment of a gentleman in New York, and during my stay I became extremely interested in the national game. I picked up a few of the American idioms while in the country." He smiled apologetically. "They sometimes slip out."

"Let 'em slip!" said Mr. Pett with enthusiasm. "You're the first thing that's reminded me of home since I left. Say!"

"Sir?"

"Got a good place here?"

"Er--oh, yes, sir."

"Well, here's my card. If you ever feel like making a change, there's a job waiting for you at that address."

"Thank you, sir." Mr. Crocker stooped.

"Your hat, sir."

He held it out, gazing fondly at it the while. It was like being home again to see a hat like that. He followed Mr. Pett as he went into the morning-room with an affectionate eye.

Bayliss was coming along the hall, hurrying more than his wont. The ring at the front door had found him deep in an extremely interesting piece of news in his halfpenny morning paper, and he was guiltily aware of having delayed in answering it.

"Bayliss," said Mr. Crocker in a cautious undertone, "go and tell Mrs. Crocker that Mrs. Pett is waiting to see her. She's in the morning-room. If you're asked, say you let her in. Get me?"

"Yes, sir," said Bayliss, grateful for this happy solution.

"Oh, Bayliss!"

"Sir?"

"Is the wicket at Lord's likely to be too sticky for them to go on with that game to-day?"



"I hardly think it probable that there will be play, sir. There was a great deal of rain in the night."

Mr. Crocker passed on to his den with a lighter heart.

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It was Mrs. Crocker's habit, acquired after years of practice and a sedulous study of the best models, to conceal beneath a mask of well-bred indifference any emotion which she might chance to feel. Her dealings with the aristocracy of England had shown her that, while the men occasionally permitted themselves an outburst, the women never did, and she had schooled herself so rigorously that nowadays she seldom even raised her voice. Her bearing, as she approached the morning-room was calm and serene, but inwardly curiosity consumed her. It was unbelievable that Nesta could have come to try to effect a reconciliation, yet she could think of no other reason for her visit.

She was surprised to find three persons in the morning-room. Bayliss, delivering his message, had mentioned only Mrs. Pett. To Mrs. Crocker the assemblage had the appearance of being a sort of Old Home Week of Petts, a kind of Pett family mob-scene. Her sister's second marriage having taken place after their quarrel, she had never seen her new brother-in-law, but she assumed that

the little man lurking in the background was Mr. Pett. The guess was confirmed.

"Good morning, Eugenia," said Mrs. Pett.

"Peter, this is my sister, Eugenia. My husband."

Mrs. Crocker bowed stiffly. She was thinking how hopelessly American Mr. Pett was, how baggy his clothes looked, what absurdly shaped shoes he wore, how appalling his hat was, how little hair he had and how deplorably he lacked all those graces of repose, culture, physical beauty, refinement, dignity, and mental alertness which raise men above the level of the common cock-roach.

Mr. Pett, on his side, receiving her cold glance squarely between the eyes, felt as if he were being disembowelled by a clumsy amateur. He could not help wondering what sort of a man this fellow Crocker was whom this sister-in-law of his had married. He pictured him as a handsome, powerful, robust individual with a strong jaw and a loud voice, for he could imagine no lesser type of man consenting to link his lot with such a woman. He sidled in a circuitous manner towards a distant chair, and, having lowered himself into it, kept perfectly still, pretending to be dead, like an opossum. He wished to take no part whatever in the coming interview.

"Ogden, of course, you know," said Mrs. Pett.

She was sitting so stiffly upright on a hard chair and had so much the appearance of having been hewn from the living rock that every time she opened her mouth it was as if a statue had spoken.

"I know Ogden," said Mrs. Crocker shortly. "Will you please stop him fidgeting with that vase? It is valuable."

She directed at little Ogden, who was juggling aimlessly with a handsome objet d'art of the early Chinese school, a glance similar to that which had just disposed of his step-father. But Ogden required more than a glance to divert him from any pursuit in which he was interested. He shifted a deposit of candy from his right cheek to his left cheek, inspected Mrs. Crocker for a moment with a pale eye, and resumed his juggling. Mrs. Crocker meant nothing in his young life.

"Ogden, come and sit down," said Mrs. Pett.

"Don't want to sit down."

"Are you making a long stay in England, Nesta?" asked Mrs. Crocker coldly.

"I don't know. We have made no plans."

"Indeed?"

She broke off. Ogden, who had possessed himself of a bronze paper-knife, had begun to tap the vase with it. The ringing note thus produced appeared to please his young mind.

"If Ogden really wishes to break that vase," said Mrs. Crocker in a detached voice, "let me ring for the butler to bring him a hammer."

"Ogden!" said Mrs. Pett.

"Oh Gee! A fellow can't do a thing!" muttered Ogden, and walked to the window. He stood looking out into the square, a slight twitching of the ears indicating that he still made progress with the candy.

"Still the same engaging child!" murmured Mrs. Crocker.

"I did not come here to discuss Ogden!" said Mrs. Pett.

Mrs. Crocker raised her eyebrows. Not even Mrs. Otho Lanners, from whom she had learned the art, could do it more effectively.

"I am still waiting to find out why you did come, Nesta!"

"I came here to talk to you about your step-son, James Crocker."

The discipline to which Mrs. Crocker had subjected herself in the matter of the display of emotion saved her from the humiliation of showing surprise. She waved her hand graciously--in the manner of the Duchess of Axminster, a supreme hand-waver--to indicate that she was all attention.

"Your step-son, James Crocker," repeated Mrs. Pett. "What is it the New York papers call him, Peter?"

Mr. Pett, the human opossum, came to life. He had contrived to create about himself such a defensive atmosphere of non-existence that now that he re-entered the conversation it was as if a corpse had popped out of its tomb like a jack-in-the-box.

Obeying the voice of authority, he pushed the tombstone to one side and poked his head out of the sepulchre.

"Piccadilly Jim!" he murmured apologetically.

"Piccadilly Jim!" said Mrs. Crocker. "It is extremely impertinent of them!"

In spite of his misery, a wan smile appeared on Mr. Pett's death-mask at this remark.

"They should worry about--!"

"Peter!"

Mr. Pett died again, greatly respected.

"Why should the New York papers refer to James at all?" said Mrs. Crocker.

"Explain, Peter!"

Mr. Pett emerged reluctantly from the cerements. He had supposed that Nesta would do the talking.

"Well, he's a news-item."

"Why?"

"Well, here's a boy that's been a regular fellow--raised in America--done work on a newspaper--suddenly taken off to England to become a London dude--mixing with all the dukes, playing pinochle with the King--naturally they're interested in him."

A more agreeable expression came over Mrs. Crocker's face.

"Of course, that is quite true. One cannot prevent the papers from printing what they wish. So they have published articles about James' doings in English Society?"

"Doings," said Mr. Pett, "is right!"

"Something has got to be done about it," said Mrs. Pett.

Mr. Pett endorsed this.

"Nesta's going to lose her health if these stories go on," he said.

Mrs. Crocker raised her eyebrows, but she had hard work to keep a contented smile off her face.

"If you are not above petty jealousy, Nesta . . ."

Mrs. Pett laughed a sharp, metallic laugh.

"It is the disgrace I object to!"

"The disgrace!"

"What else would you call it, Eugenia? Wouldn't you be ashamed if you opened your Sunday paper and came upon a full page article about your nephew having got intoxicated at the races and fought a book-maker--having broken up a political meeting--having been sued for breach-of-promise by a barmaid . . ."

Mrs. Crocker preserved her well-bred calm, but she was shaken. The episodes to which her sister had alluded were ancient history, horrors of the long-dead past, but it seemed that they still lived in print. There and then she registered the resolve to talk to her step-son James when she got hold of him in such a manner as would scourge the offending Adam out of him for once and for all.

"And not only that," continued Mrs. Pett. "That would be bad enough in itself, but somehow the papers have discovered that I am the boy's aunt. Two weeks ago they printed my photograph with one of these articles. I suppose they will always do it now. That is why I have come to you. It must stop. And the only way it can be made to stop is by taking your step-son away from London where he is running wild. Peter has most kindly consented to give the boy a position in his office. It is very good of him, for the boy cannot in the nature of things be of any use for a very long time, but we have talked it over and it seems the only course. I have come this morning to ask you to let us take James Crocker back to America with us and keep him out of mischief by giving him honest work.



What do you say?"

Mrs. Crocker raised her eyebrows.

"What do you expect me to say? It is utterly preposterous. I have never heard anything so supremely absurd in my life."

"You refuse?"

"Of course I refuse."

"I think you are extremely foolish."

"Indeed!"

Mr. Pett cowed in his chair. He was feeling rather like a nervous and peace-loving patron of a wild western saloon who observes two cowboys reach for their hip-pockets. Neither his wife nor his sister-in-law paid any attention to him. The concluding exercises of a duel of the eyes was in progress between them. After some silent, age-long moments, Mrs. Crocker laughed a light laugh.

"Most extraordinary!" she murmured.

Mrs. Pett was in no mood for Anglicisms.

"You know perfectly well, Eugenia," she said heatedly, "that James Crocker is being ruined here. For his sake, if not for mine--"

Mrs. Crocker laughed another light laugh, one of those offensive rippling things which cause so much annoyance.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Nesta! Ruined! Really! It is quite true that, a long while ago, when he was much younger and not quite used to the ways of London Society, James was a little wild, but all that sort of thing is over now. He knows"--she paused, setting herself as it were for the punch--"he knows that at any moment the government may decide to give his father a Peerage . . ."

The blow went home. A quite audible gasp escaped her stricken sister.

"What!"

Mrs. Crocker placed two ringed fingers before her mouth in order not to hide a languid yawn.

"Yes. Didn't you know? But of course you live so out of the world. Oh yes, it is extremely probable that Mr. Crocker's name will appear in the next Honours List. He is very highly thought of by the Powers. So naturally James is quite aware that he must behave

in a suitable manner. He is a dear boy! He was handicapped at first by getting into the wrong set, but now his closest friend is Lord Percy Whipple, the second son of the Duke of Devizes, who is one of the most eminent men in the kingdom and a personal friend of the Premier."

Mrs. Pett was in bad shape under this rain of titles, but she rallied herself to reply in kind.

"Indeed?" she said. "I should like to meet him. I have no doubt he knows our great friend, Lord Wisbeach."

Mrs. Crocker was a little taken aback. She had not supposed that her sister had even this small shot in her locker.

"Do you know Lord Wisbeach?" she said.

"Oh yes," replied Mrs. Pett, beginning to feel a little better.

"We have been seeing him every day. He always says that he looks on my house as quite a home. He knows so few people in New York. It has been a great comfort to him, I think, knowing us."

Mrs. Crocker had had time now to recover her poise.

"Poor dear Wizzy!" she said languidly.

Mrs. Pett started.

"What!"

"I suppose he is still the same dear, stupid, shiftless fellow? He left here with the intention of travelling round the world, and he has stopped in New York! How like him!"

"Do you know Lord Wisbeach?" demanded Mrs. Pett.

Mrs. Crocker raised her eyebrows.

"Know him? Why, I suppose, after Lord Percy Whipple, he is James' most intimate friend!"

Mrs. Pett rose. She was dignified even in defeat. She collected Ogden and Mr. Pett with an eye which even Ogden could see was not to be trifled with. She uttered no word.

"Must you really go?" said Mrs. Crocker. "It was sweet of you to bother to come all the way from America like this. So strange to meet any one from America nowadays. Most extraordinary!"

The cortege left the room in silence. Mrs. Crocker had touched the bell, but the mourners did not wait for the arrival of Bayliss. They were in no mood for the formalities of polite

Society. They wanted to be elsewhere, and they wanted to be there quick. The front door had closed behind them before the butler reached the morning-room.

"Bayliss," said Mrs. Crocker with happy, shining face, "send for the car to come round at once."

"Very good, madam."

"Is Mr. James up yet?"

"I believe not, madam."

Mrs. Crocker went upstairs to her room. If Bayliss had not been within earshot, she would probably have sung a bar or two. Her amiability extended even to her step-son, though she had not altered her intention of speaking eloquently to him on certain matters when she could get hold of him. That, however, could wait. For the moment, she felt in vein for a gentle drive in the Park.

A few minutes after she had disappeared, there was a sound of slow footsteps on the stairs, and a young man came down into the hall. Bayliss, who had finished telephoning to the garage for Mrs. Crocker's limousine and was about to descend to those lower depths where he had his being, turned, and a grave smile of

welcome played over his face.

"Good morning, Mr. James," he said.