

CHAPTER IV

JIMMY'S DISTURBING NEWS

Jimmy Crocker was a tall and well-knit young man who later on in the day would no doubt be at least passably good-looking. At the moment an unbecoming pallor marred his face, and beneath his eyes were marks that suggested that he had slept little and ill. He stood at the foot of the stairs, yawning cavernously.

"Bayliss," he said, "have you been painting yourself yellow?"

"No, sir."

"Strange! Your face looks a bright gamboge to me, and your outlines wobble. Bayliss, never mix your drinks. I say this to you as a friend. Is there any one in the morning-room?"

"No, Mr. James."

"Speak softly, Bayliss, for I am not well. I am conscious of a strange weakness. Lead me to the morning-room, then, and lay me gently on a sofa. These are the times that try men's souls."

The sun was now shining strongly through the windows of the morning-room. Bayliss lowered the shades. Jimmy Crocker sank onto

the sofa, and closed his eyes.

"Bayliss."

"Sir?"

"A conviction is stealing over me that I am about to expire."

"Shall I bring you a little breakfast, Mr. James?"

A strong shudder shook Jimmy.

"Don't be flippant, Bayliss," he protested. "Try to cure yourself of this passion for being funny at the wrong time. Your comedy is good, but tact is a finer quality than humour. Perhaps you think I have forgotten that morning when I was feeling just as I do to-day and you came to my bedside and asked me if I would like a nice rasher of ham. I haven't and I never shall. You may bring me a brandy-and-soda. Not a large one. A couple of bath-tubs full will be enough."

"Very good, Mr. James."

"And now leave me, Bayliss, for I would be alone. I have to make a series of difficult and exhaustive tests to ascertain whether I am still alive."

When the butler had gone, Jimmy adjusted the cushions, closed his eyes, and remained for a space in a state of coma. He was trying, as well as an exceedingly severe headache would permit, to recall the salient events of the previous night. At present his memories refused to solidify. They poured about in his brain in a fluid and formless condition, exasperating to one who sought for hard facts.

It seemed strange to Jimmy that the shadowy and inchoate vision of a combat, a fight, a brawl of some kind persisted in flitting about in the recesses of his mind, always just far enough away to elude capture. The absurdity of the thing annoyed him. A man has either indulged in a fight overnight or he has not indulged in a fight overnight. There can be no middle course. That he should be uncertain on the point was ridiculous. Yet, try as he would, he could not be sure. There were moments when he seemed on the very verge of settling the matter, and then some invisible person would meanly insert a red-hot corkscrew in the top of his head and begin to twist it, and this would interfere with calm thought. He was still in a state of uncertainty when Bayliss returned, bearing healing liquids on a tray.

"Shall I set it beside you, sir?"

Jimmy opened one eye.

"Indubitably. No mean word, that, Bayliss, for the morning after. Try it yourself next time. Bayliss, who let me in this morning?"

"Let you in, sir?"

"Precisely. I was out and now I am in. Obviously I must have passed the front door somehow. This is logic."

"I fancy you let yourself in, Mr. James, with your key."

"That would seem to indicate that I was in a state of icy sobriety. Yet, if such is the case, how is it that I can't remember whether I murdered somebody or not last night? It isn't the sort of thing your sober man would lightly forget. Have you ever murdered anybody, Bayliss?"

"No, sir."

"Well, if you had, you would remember it next morning?"

"I imagine so, Mr. James."

"Well, it's a funny thing, but I can't get rid of the impression that at some point in my researches into the night life of London yestreen I fell upon some person to whom I had never been

introduced and committed mayhem upon his person."

It seemed to Bayliss that the time had come to impart to Mr. James a piece of news which he had supposed would require no imparting. He looked down upon his young master's recumbent form with a grave commiseration. It was true that he had never been able to tell with any certainty whether Mr. James intended the statements he made to be taken literally or not, but on the present occasion he seemed to have spoken seriously and to be genuinely at a loss to recall an episode over the printed report of which the entire domestic staff had been gloating ever since the arrival of the halfpenny morning paper to which they subscribed.

"Do you really mean it, Mr. James?" he enquired cautiously.

"Mean what?"

"You have really forgotten that you were engaged in a fracas last night at the Six Hundred Club?"

Jimmy sat up with a jerk, staring at this omniscient man. Then the movement having caused a renewal of the operations of the red-hot corkscrew, he fell back again with a groan.

"Was I? How on earth did you know? Why should you know all about it when I can't remember a thing? It was my fault, not yours."

"There is quite a long report of it in to-day's Daily Sun, Mr. James."

"A report? In the Sun?"

"Half a column, Mr. James. Would you like me to fetch the paper? I have it in my pantry."

"I should say so. Trot a quick heat back with it. This wants looking into."

Bayliss retired, to return immediately with the paper. Jimmy took it, gazed at it, and handed it back.

"I overestimated my powers. It can't be done. Have you any important duties at the moment, Bayliss?"

"No, sir."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind reading me the bright little excerpt, then?"

"Certainly, sir."

"It will be good practice for you. I am convinced I am going to be

a confirmed invalid for the rest of my life, and it will be part of your job to sit at my bedside and read to me. By the way, does the paper say who the party of the second part was? Who was the citizen with whom I went to the mat?"

"Lord Percy Whipple, Mr. James."

"Lord who?"

"Lord Percy Whipple."

"Never heard of him. Carry on, Bayliss."

Jimmy composed himself to listen, yawning.