CHAPTER VI

JIMMY ABANDONS PICCADILLY

Jimmy removed himself sorrowfully from the doorstep of the Duke of Devizes' house in Cleveland Row. His mission had been a failure. In answer to his request to be permitted to see Lord Percy Whipple, the butler had replied that Lord Percy was confined to his bed and was seeing nobody. He eyed Jimmy, on receiving his name, with an interest which he failed to conceal, for he too, like Bayliss, had read and heartily enjoyed Bill Blake's spirited version of the affair of last night which had appeared in the Daily Sun. Indeed, he had clipped the report out and had been engaged in pasting it in an album when the bell rang.

In face of this repulse, Jimmy's campaign broke down. He was at a loss to know what to do next. He ebbed away from the Duke's front door like an army that has made an unsuccessful frontal attack on an impregnable fortress. He could hardly force his way in and search for Lord Percy.

He walked along Pall Mall, deep in thought. It was a beautiful day. The rain which had fallen in the night and relieved Mr. Crocker from the necessity of watching cricket had freshened

London up.

The sun was shining now from a turquoise sky. A gentle breeze blew from the south. Jimmy made his way into Piccadilly, and found that thoroughfare a-roar with happy automobilists and cheery pedestrians. Their gaiety irritated him. He resented their apparent enjoyment of life.

Jimmy's was not a nature that lent itself readily to introspection, but he was putting himself now through a searching self-examination which was revealing all kinds of unsuspected flaws in his character. He had been having too good a time for years past to have leisure to realise that he possessed any responsibilities. He had lived each day as it came in the spirit of the Monks of Thelema. But his father's reception of the news of last night's escapade and the few words he had said had given him pause. Life had taken on of a sudden a less simple aspect. Dimly, for he was not accustomed to thinking along these lines, he perceived the numbing truth that we human beings are merely as many pieces in a jig-saw puzzle and that our every movement affects the fortunes of some other piece. Just so, faintly at first and taking shape by degrees, must the germ of civic spirit have come to Prehistoric Man. We are all individualists till we wake up.

The thought of having done anything to make his father unhappy

was bitter to Jimmy Crocker. They had always been more like brothers than father and son. Hard thoughts about himself surged through Jimmy's mind. With a dejectedness to which it is possible that his headache contributed he put the matter squarely to himself. His father was longing to return to America--he, Jimmy, by his idiotic behaviour was putting obstacles in the way of that return--what was the answer? The answer, to Jimmy's way of thinking, was that all was not well with James Crocker, that, when all the evidence was weighed, James Crocker would appear to be a fool, a worm, a selfish waster, and a hopeless, low-down, skunk.

Having come to this conclusion, Jimmy found himself so low in spirit that the cheerful bustle of Piccadilly was too much for him. He turned, and began to retrace his steps. Arriving in due course at the top of the Haymarket he hesitated, then turned down it till he reached Cockspur Street. Here the Trans-Atlantic steamship companies have their offices, and so it came about that Jimmy, chancing to look up as he walked, perceived before him, riding gallantly on a cardboard ocean behind a plate-glass window, the model of a noble vessel. He stopped, conscious of a curious thrill. There is a superstition in all of us. When an accidental happening chances to fit smoothly in with a mood, seeming to come as a direct commentary on that mood, we are apt to accept it in defiance of our pure reason as an omen. Jimmy strode to the window and inspected the model narrowly. The sight

of it had started a new train of thought. His heart began to race. Hypnotic influences were at work on him.

Why not? Could there be a simpler solution of the whole trouble?

Inside the office he would see a man with whiskers buying a ticket for New York. The simplicity of the process fascinated him. All you had to do was to walk in, bend over the counter while the clerk behind it made dabs with a pencil at the illustrated plate of the ship's interior organs, and hand over your money. A child could do it, if in funds. At this thought his hand strayed to his trouser-pocket. A musical crackling of bank-notes proceeded from the depths. His quarterly allowance had been paid to him only a short while before, and, though a willing spender, he still retained a goodly portion of it. He rustled the notes again. There was enough in that pocket to buy three tickets to New York. Should he? . . . Or, on the other hand--always look on both sides of the question--should he not?

It would certainly seem to be the best thing for all parties if he did follow the impulse. By remaining in London he was injuring everybody, himself included. . . . Well, there was no harm in making enquiries. Probably the boat was full up anyway. . . . He walked into the office.

"Have you anything left on the Atlantic this trip?"

The clerk behind the counter was quite the wrong sort of person for Jimmy to have had dealings with in his present mood. What Jimmy needed was a grave, sensible man who would have laid a hand on his shoulder and said "Do nothing rash, my boy!" The clerk fell short of this ideal in practically every particular. He was about twenty-two, and he seemed perfectly enthusiastic about the idea of Jimmy going to America. He beamed at Jimmy.

"Plenty of room," he said. "Very few people crossing. Give you excellent accommodation."

"When does the boat sail?"

"Eight to-morrow morning from Liverpool. Boat-train leaves Paddington six to-night."

Prudence came at the eleventh hour to check Jimmy. This was not a matter, he perceived, to be decided recklessly, on the spur of a sudden impulse. Above all, it was not a matter to be decided before lunch. An empty stomach breeds imagination. He had ascertained that he could sail on the Atlantic if he wished to. The sensible thing to do now was to go and lunch and see how he felt about it after that. He thanked the clerk, and started to walk up the Haymarket, feeling hard-headed and practical, yet with a strong premonition that he was going to make a fool of

himself just the same.

It was half-way up the Haymarket that he first became conscious of the girl with the red hair.

Plunged in thought, he had not noticed her before. And yet she had been walking a few paces in front of him most of the way. She had come out of Panton Street, walking briskly, as one going to keep a pleasant appointment. She carried herself admirably, with a jaunty swing.

Having become conscious of this girl, Jimmy, ever a warm admirer of the sex, began to feel a certain interest stealing over him. With interest came speculation. He wondered who she was. He wondered where she had bought that excellently fitting suit of tailor-made grey. He admired her back, and wondered whether her face, if seen, would prove a disappointment. Thus musing, he drew near to the top of the Haymarket, where it ceases to be a street and becomes a whirlpool of rushing traffic. And here the girl, having paused and looked over her shoulder, stepped off the sidewalk. As she did so a taxi-cab rounded the corner quickly from the direction of Coventry Street.

The agreeable surprise of finding the girl's face fully as attractive as her back had stimulated Jimmy, so that he was keyed up for the exhibition of swift presence-of-mind. He jumped

forward and caught her arm, and swung her to one side as the cab rattled past, its driver thinking hard thoughts to himself. The whole episode was an affair of seconds.

"Thank you," said the girl.

She rubbed the arm which he had seized with rather a rueful expression. She was a little white, and her breath came quickly.

"I hope I didn't hurt you," said Jimmy.

"You did. Very much. But the taxi would have hurt me more."

She laughed. She looked very attractive when she laughed. She had a small, piquant, vivacious face. Jimmy, as he looked at it, had an odd feeling that he had seen her before--when and where he did not know. That mass of red-gold hair seemed curiously familiar. Somewhere in the hinterland of his mind there lurked a memory, but he could not bring it into the open. As for the girl, if she had ever met him before, she showed no signs of recollecting it. Jimmy decided that, if he had seen her, it must have been in his reporter days. She was plainly an American, and he occasionally had the feeling that he had seen every one in America when he had worked for the Chronicle.

"That's right," he said approvingly. "Always look on the bright

side."

"I only arrived in London yesterday," said the girl, "and I haven't got used to your keeping-to-the-left rules. I don't suppose I shall ever get back to New York alive. Perhaps, as you have saved my life, you wouldn't mind doing me another service. Can you tell me which is the nearest and safest way to a restaurant called the Regent Grill?"

"It's just over there, at the corner of Regent Street. As to the safest way, if I were you I should cross over at the top of the street there and then work round westward. Otherwise you will have to cross Piccadilly Circus."

"I absolutely refuse even to try to cross Piccadilly Circus. Thank you very much. I will follow your advice. I hope I shall get there. It doesn't seem at all likely."

She gave him a little nod, and moved away. Jimmy turned into that drug-store at the top of the Haymarket at which so many Londoners have found healing and comfort on the morning after, and bought the pink drink for which his system had been craving since he rose from bed. He wondered why, as he drained it, he should feel ashamed and guilty.

A few minutes later he found himself, with mild surprise, going

down the steps of the Regent Grill. It was the last place he had had in his mind when he had left the steamship company's offices in quest of lunch. He had intended to seek out some quiet, restful nook where he could be alone with his thoughts. If anybody had told him then that five minutes later he would be placing himself of his own free will within the range of a restaurant orchestra playing "My Little Grey Home in the West"--and the orchestra at the Regent played little else--he would not have believed him.

Restaurants in all large cities have their ups and downs. At this time the Regent Grill was enjoying one of those bursts of popularity for which restaurateurs pray to whatever strange gods they worship. The more prosperous section of London's Bohemia flocked to it daily. When Jimmy had deposited his hat with the robber-band who had their cave just inside the main entrance and had entered the grill-room, he found it congested. There did not appear to be a single unoccupied table.

From where he stood he could see the girl of the red-gold hair. Her back was towards him, and she was sitting at a table against one of the pillars with a little man with eye-glasses, a handsome woman in the forties, and a small stout boy who was skirmishing with the olives. As Jimmy hesitated, the vigilant head-waiter, who knew him well, perceived him, and hurried up.

"In one moment, Mister Crockaire!" he said, and began to scatter commands among the underlings. "I will place a table for you in the aisle."

"Next to that pillar, please," said Jimmy.

The underlings had produced a small table--apparently from up their sleeves, and were draping it in a cloth. Jimmy sat down and gave his order. Ordering was going on at the other table. The little man seemed depressed at the discovery that corn on the cob and soft-shelled crabs were not to be obtained, and his wife's reception of the news that clams were not included in the Regent's bill-of-fare was so indignant that one would have said that she regarded the fact as evidence that Great Britain was going to pieces and would shortly lose her place as a world power.

A selection having finally been agreed upon, the orchestra struck up "My Little Grey Home in the West," and no attempt was made to compete with it. When the last lingering strains had died away and the violinist-leader, having straightened out the kinks in his person which the rendition of the melody never failed to produce, had bowed for the last time, a clear, musical voice spoke from the other side of the pillar.

"Jimmy Crocker is a WORM!"

Jimmy spilled his cocktail. It might have been the voice of Conscience.

"I despise him more than any one on earth. I hate to think that he's an American."

Jimmy drank the few drops that remained in his glass, partly to make sure of them, partly as a restorative. It is an unnerving thing to be despised by a red-haired girl whose life you have just saved. To Jimmy it was not only unnerving; it was uncanny. This girl had not known him when they met on the street a few moments before. How then was she able to display such intimate acquaintance with his character now as to describe him--justly enough--as a worm? Mingled with the mystery of the thing was its pathos. The thought that a girl could be as pretty as this one and yet dislike him so much was one of the saddest things Jimmy had ever come across. It was like one of those Things Which Make Me Weep In This Great City so dear to the hearts of the sob-writers of his late newspaper.

A waiter bustled up with a high-ball. Jimmy thanked him with his eyes. He needed it. He raised it to his lips.

"He's always drinking--"

He set it down hurriedly.

"--and making a disgraceful exhibition of himself in public! I always think Jimmy Crocker--"

Jimmy began to wish that somebody would stop this girl. Why couldn't the little man change the subject to the weather, or that stout child start prattling about some general topic? Surely a boy of that age, newly arrived in London, must have all sorts of things to prattle about? But the little man was dealing strenuously with a breaded cutlet, while the stout boy, grimly silent, surrounded fish-pie in the forthright manner of a starving python. As for the elder woman, she seemed to be wrestling with unpleasant thoughts, beyond speech.

"--I always think that Jimmy Crocker is the worst case I know of the kind of American young man who spends all his time in Europe and tries to become an imitation Englishman. Most of them are the sort any country would be glad to get rid of, but he used to work once, so you can't excuse him on the ground that he hasn't the sense to know what he's doing. He's deliberately chosen to loaf about London and make a pest of himself. He went to pieces with his eyes open. He's a perfect, utter, hopeless WORM!"

Jimmy had never been very fond of the orchestra at the Regent Grill, holding the view that it interfered with conversation and

made for an unhygienic rapidity of mastication; but he was profoundly grateful to it now for bursting suddenly into La Boheme, the loudest item in its repertory. Under cover of that protective din he was able to toy with a steaming dish which his waiter had brought. Probably that girl was saying all sorts of things about him still but he could not hear them.

The music died away. For a moment the tortured air quivered in comparative silence; then the girl's voice spoke again. She had, however, selected another topic of conversation.

"I've seen all I want to of England," she said, "I've seen Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament and His Majesty's Theatre and the Savoy and the Cheshire Cheese, and I've developed a frightful home-sickness. Why shouldn't we go back to-morrow?"

For the first time in the proceedings the elder woman spoke. She cast aside her mantle of gloom long enough to say "Yes," then wrapped it round her again. The little man, who had apparently been waiting for her vote before giving his own, said that the sooner he was on board a New York-bound boat the better he would be pleased. The stout boy said nothing. He had finished his fish-pie, and was now attacking jam roll with a sort of morose resolution.

"There's certain to be a boat," said the girl. "There always is.

You've got to say that for England--it's an easy place to get back to America from." She paused. "What I can't understand is how, after having been in America and knowing what it was like, Jimmy Crocker could stand living . . ."

The waiter had come to Jimmy's side, bearing cheese; but Jimmy looked at it with dislike and shook his head in silent negation. He was about to depart from this place. His capacity for absorbing home-truths about himself was exhausted. He placed a noiseless sovereign on the table, caught the waiter's eye, registered renunciation, and departed soft-footed down the aisle. The waiter, a man who had never been able to bring himself to believe in miracles, revised the views of a life-time. He looked at the sovereign, then at Jimmy, then at the sovereign again. Then he took up the coin and bit it furtively.

A few minutes later, a hat-check boy, untipped for the first time in his predatory career, was staring at Jimmy with equal intensity, but with far different feelings. Speechless concern was limned on his young face.

The commissionaire at the Piccadilly entrance of the restaurant touched his hat ingratiatingly, with the smug confidence of a man who is accustomed to getting sixpence a time for doing it.

"Taxi, Mr. Crocker?"

"A worm," said Jimmy.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Always drinking," explained Jimmy, "and making a pest of himself."

He passed on. The commissionaire stared after him as intently as the waiter and the hat-check boy. He had sometimes known Mr. Crocker like this after supper, but never before during the luncheon hour.

Jimmy made his way to his club in Northumberland Avenue. For perhaps half an hour he sat in a condition of coma in the smoking-room; then, his mind made up, he went to one of the writing-tables. He sat awaiting inspiration for some minutes, then began to write.

The letter he wrote was to his father:

Dear Dad:

I have been thinking over what we talked about this morning, and it seems to me the best thing I can do is to

drop out of sight for a brief space. If I stay on in London, I am likely at any moment to pull some boner like last night's which will spill the beans for you once more. The least I can do for you is to give you a clear field and not interfere, so I am off to New York by to-night's boat.

I went round to Percy's to try to grovel in the dust before him, but he wouldn't see me. It's no good grovelling in the dust of the front steps for the benefit of a man who's in bed on the second floor, so I withdrew in more or less good order. I then got the present idea. Mark how all things work together for good. When they come to you and say "No title for you. Your son slugged our pal Percy," all you have to do is to come back at them with "I know my son slugged Percy, and believe me I didn't do a thing to him! I packed him off to America within twenty-four hours. Get me right, boys! I'm anti-Jimmy and pro-Percy." To which their reply will be "Oh, well, in that case arise, Lord Crocker!" or whatever they say when slipping a title to a deserving guy. So you will see that by making this getaway I am doing the best I can to put things straight. I shall give this to Bayliss to give to you. I am going to call him up on the phone in a minute to have him pack a few simple tooth-brushes and so on for me. On landing in New York, I shall instantly proceed to the

Polo Grounds to watch a game of Rounders, and will cable you the full score. Well. I think that's about all. So good-bye--or even farewell--for the present.

J.

P.S. I know you'll understand, dad. I'm doing what seems to me the only possible thing. Don't worry about me. I shall be all right. I'll get back my old job and be a terrific success all round. You go ahead and get that title and then meet me at the entrance of the Polo Grounds. I'll be looking for you.

P.P.S. I'm a worm.

The young clerk at the steamship offices appeared rejoiced to see Jimmy once more. With a sunny smile he snatched a pencil from his ear and plunged it into the vitals of the Atlantic.

"How about E. a hundred and eight?"

"Suits me."

"You're too late to go in the passenger-list, of course."

Jimmy did not reply. He was gazing rigidly at a girl who had just come in, a girl with red hair and a friendly smile.

"So you're sailing on the Atlantic, too!" she said, with a glance at the chart on the counter. "How odd! We have just decided to go back on her too. There's nothing to keep us here and we're all homesick. Well, you see I wasn't run over after I left you."

A delicious understanding relieved Jimmy's swimming brain, as thunder relieves the tense and straining air. The feeling that he was going mad left him, as the simple solution of his mystery came to him. This girl must have heard of him in New York--perhaps she knew people whom he knew and it was on hearsay, not on personal acquaintance, that she based that dislike of him which she had expressed with such freedom and conviction so short a while before at the Regent Grill. She did not know who he was!

Into this soothing stream of thought cut the voice of the clerk.

"What name, please?"

Jimmy's mind rocked again. Why were these things happening to him to-day of all days, when he needed the tenderest treatment, when he had a headache already?

The clerk was eyeing him expectantly. He had laid down his pencil

and was holding aloft a pen. Jimmy gulped. Every name in the English language had passed from his mind. And then from out of the dark came inspiration.

"Bayliss," he croaked.

The girl held out her hand.

"Then we can introduce ourselves at last. My name is Ann Chester. How do you do, Mr. Bayliss?"

"How do you do, Miss Chester?"

The clerk had finished writing the ticket, and was pressing labels and a pink paper on him. The paper, he gathered dully, was a form and had to be filled up. He examined it, and found it to be a searching document. Some of its questions could be answered off-hand, others required thought.

"Height?" Simple. Five foot eleven.

"Hair?" Simple. Brown.

"Eyes?" Simple again. Blue.

Next, queries of a more offensive kind.

"Are you a polygamist?"

He could answer that. Decidedly no. One wife would be ample--provided she had red-gold hair, brown-gold eyes, the right kind of mouth, and a dimple. Whatever doubts there might be in his mind on other points, on that one he had none whatever.

"Have you ever been in prison?"

Not yet.

And then a very difficult one. "Are you a lunatic?"

Jimmy hesitated. The ink dried on his pen. He was wondering.

* * *

In the dim cavern of Paddington Station the boat-train snorted impatiently, varying the process with an occasional sharp shriek. The hands of the station clock pointed to ten minutes to six. The platform was a confused mass of travellers, porters, baggage, trucks, boys with buns and fruits, boys with magazines, friends, relatives, and Bayliss the butler, standing like a faithful

watchdog beside a large suitcase. To the human surf that broke and swirled about him he paid no attention. He was looking for the young master.

Jimmy clove the crowd like a one-man flying-wedge. Two fruit and bun boys who impeded his passage drifted away like leaves on an Autumn gale.

"Good man!" He possessed himself of the suitcase. "I was afraid you might not be able to get here."

"The mistress is dining out, Mr. James. I was able to leave the house."

"Have you packed everything I shall want?"

"Within the scope of a suitcase, yes, sir."

"Splendid! Oh, by the way, give this letter to my father, will you?"

"Very good, sir."

"I'm glad you were able to manage. I thought your voice sounded doubtful over the phone."

"I was a good deal taken aback, Mr. James. Your decision to leave was so extremely sudden."

"So was Columbus'. You know about him? He saw an egg standing on its head and whizzed off like a jack-rabbit."

"If you will pardon the liberty, Mr. James, is it not a little rash--?"

"Don't take the joy out of life, Bayliss. I may be a chump, but try to forget it. Use your willpower."

"Good evening, Mr. Bayliss," said a voice behind them. They both turned. The butler was gazing rather coyly at a vision in a grey tailor-made suit.

"Good evening, miss," he said doubtfully.

Ann looked at him in astonishment, then broke into a smile.

"How stupid of me! I meant this Mr. Bayliss. Your son! We met at the steamship offices. And before that he saved my life. So we are old friends."

Bayliss, gaping perplexedly and feeling unequal to the intellectual pressure of the conversation, was surprised further

to perceive a warning scowl on the face of his Mr. James. Jimmy had not foreseen this thing, but he had a quick mind and was equal to it.

"How are you, Miss Chester? My father has come down to see me off. This is Miss Chester, dad."

A British butler is not easily robbed of his poise, but Bayliss was frankly unequal to the sudden demand on his presence of mind. He lowered his jaw an inch or two, but spoke no word.

"Dad's a little upset at my going," whispered Jimmy confidentially. "He's not quite himself."

Ann was a girl possessed not only of ready tact but of a kind heart. She had summed up Mr. Bayliss at a glance. Every line of him proclaimed him a respectable upper servant. No girl on earth could have been freer than she of snobbish prejudice, but she could not check a slight thrill of surprise and disappointment at the discovery of Jimmy's humble origin. She understood everything, and there were tears in her eyes as she turned away to avoid intruding on the last moments of the parting of father and son.

"I'll see you on the boat, Mr. Bayliss," she said.

"Eh?" said Bayliss.

"Yes, yes," said Jimmy. "Good-bye till then."

Ann walked on to her compartment. She felt as if she had just read a whole long novel, one of those chunky younger-English-novelist things. She knew the whole story as well as if it had been told to her in detail. She could see the father, the honest steady butler, living his life with but one aim, to make a gentleman of his beloved only son. Year by year he had saved. Probably he had sent the son to college. And now, with a father's blessing and the remains of a father's savings, the boy was setting out for the New World, where dollar-bills grew on trees and no one asked or cared who any one else's father might be.

There was a lump in her throat. Bayliss would have been amazed if he could have known what a figure of pathetic fineness he seemed to her. And then her thoughts turned to Jimmy, and she was aware of a glow of kindliness towards him. His father had succeeded in his life's ambition. He had produced a gentleman! How easily and simply, without a trace of snobbish shame, the young man had introduced his father. There was the right stuff in him. He was not ashamed of the humble man who had given him his chance in life. She found herself liking Jimmy amazingly . . .

The hands of the clock pointed to three minutes to the hour. Porters skimmed to and fro like water-beetles.

"I can't explain," said Jimmy. "It wasn't temporary insanity; it was necessity."

"Very good, Mr. James. I think you had better be taking your seat now."

"Quite right, I had. It would spoil the whole thing if they left me behind. Bayliss, did you ever see such eyes? Such hair! Look after my father while I am away. Don't let the dukes worry him. Oh, and, Bayliss"--Jimmy drew his hand from his pocket--"as one pal to another--"

Bayliss looked at the crackling piece of paper.

"I couldn't, Mr. James, I really couldn't! A five-pound note! I couldn't!"

"Nonsense! Be a sport!"

"Begging your pardon, Mr. James, I really couldn't. You cannot afford to throw away your money like this. You cannot have a great deal of it, if you will excuse me for saying so."

"I won't do anything of the sort. Grab it! Oh, Lord, the train's starting! Good-bye, Bayliss!"

The engine gave a final shriek of farewell. The train began to slide along the platform, pursued to the last by optimistic boys offering buns for sale. It gathered speed. Jimmy, leaning out the window, was amazed at a spectacle so unusual as practically to amount to a modern miracle--the spectacled Bayliss running. The butler was not in the pink of condition, but he was striding out gallantly. He reached the door of Jimmy's compartment, and raised his hand.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. James," he panted, "for taking the liberty, but I really couldn't!"

He reached up and thrust something into Jimmy's hand, something crisp and crackling. Then, his mission performed, fell back and stood waving a snowy handkerchief. The train plunged into the tunnel.

Jimmy stared at the five-pound note. He was aware, like Ann farther along the train, of a lump in his throat. He put the note slowly into his pocket.

The train moved on.