

## CHAPTER IX

### MRS. PETT IS SHOCKED

At five o'clock in the afternoon some ten days after her return to America, Mrs. Pett was at home to her friends in the house on Riverside Drive. The proceedings were on a scale that amounted to a reception, for they were not only a sort of official notification to New York that one of its most prominent hostesses was once more in its midst, but were also designed to entertain and impress Mr. Hammond Chester, Ann's father, who had been spending a couple of days in the metropolis preparatory to departing for South America on one of his frequent trips. He was very fond of Ann in his curious, detached way, though he never ceased in his private heart to consider it injudicious of her not to have been born a boy, and he always took in New York for a day or two on his way from one wild and lonely spot to another, if he could manage it.

The large drawing-room overlooking the Hudson was filled almost to capacity with that strange mixture of humanity which Mrs. Pett chiefly affected. She prided herself on the Bohemian element in her parties, and had become during the past two years a human drag-net, scooping Genius from its hiding-place and bringing it into the open. At different spots in the room stood the six resident geniuses to whose presence in the home Mr. Pett had such

strong objections, and in addition to these she had collected so many more of a like breed from the environs of Washington Square that the air was clamorous with the hoarse cries of futurist painters, esoteric Buddhists, vers libre poets, interior decorators, and stage reformers, sifted in among the more conventional members of society who had come to listen to them. Men with new religions drank tea with women with new hats. Apostles of Free Love expounded their doctrines to persons who had been practising them for years without realising it. All over the room throats were being strained and minds broadened.

Mr. Chester, standing near the door with Ann, eyed the assemblage with the genial contempt of a large dog for a voluble pack of small ones. He was a massive, weather-beaten man, who looked very like Ann in some ways and would have looked more like her but for the misfortune of having had some of his face clawed away by an irritable jaguar with whom he had had a difference some years back in the jungles of Peru.

"Do you like this sort of thing?" he asked.

"I don't mind it," said Ann.

"Well, I shall be very sorry to leave you, Ann, but I'm glad I'm pulling out of here this evening. Who are all these people?"

Ann surveyed the gathering.

"That's Ernest Wisden, the playwright, over there, talking to Lora Delane Porter, the feminist writer. That's Clara What's-her-name, the sculptor, with the bobbed hair. Next to her--"

Mr. Chester cut short the catalogue with a stifled yawn.

"Where's old Pete? Doesn't he come to these jamborees?"

Ann laughed.

"Poor uncle Peter! If he gets back from the office before these people leave, he will sneak up to his room and stay there till it's safe to come out. The last time I made him come to one of these parties he was pounced on by a woman who talked to him for an hour about the morality of Finance and seemed to think that millionaires were the scum of the earth."

"He never would stand up for himself." Mr. Chester's gaze hovered about the room, and paused. "Who's that fellow? I believe I've seen him before somewhere."

A constant eddying swirl was animating the multitude. Whenever the mass tended to congeal, something always seemed to stir it up

again. This was due to the restless activity of Mrs. Pett, who held it to be the duty of a good hostess to keep her guests moving. From the moment when the room began to fill till the moment when it began to empty she did not cease to plough her way to and fro, in a manner equally reminiscent of a hawk swooping on chickens and an earnest collegian bucking the line. Her guests were as a result perpetually forming new ententes and combinations, finding themselves bumped about like those little moving figures which one sees in shop-windows on Broadway, which revolve on a metal disc until, urged by impact with another little figure, they scatter to regroup themselves elsewhere. It was a fascinating feature of Mrs. Pett's at-homes and one which assisted that mental broadening process already alluded to that one never knew, when listening to a discussion on the sincerity of Oscar Wilde, whether it would not suddenly change in the middle of a sentence to an argument on the inner meaning of the Russian Ballet.

Plunging now into a group dominated for the moment by an angular woman who was saying loud and penetrating things about the suffrage, Mrs. Pett had seized and removed a tall, blonde young man with a mild, vacuous face. For the past few minutes this young man had been sitting bolt upright on a chair with his hands on his knees, so exactly in the manner of an end-man at a minstrel show that one would hardly have been surprised had he burst into song or asked a conundrum.

Ann followed her father's gaze.

"Do you mean the man talking to aunt Nesta? There, they've gone over to speak to Willie Partridge. Do you mean that one?"

"Yes. Who is he?"

"Well, I like that!" said Ann. "Considering that you introduced him to us! That's Lord Wisbeach, who came to uncle Peter with a letter of introduction from you. You met him in Canada."

"I remember now. I ran across him in British Columbia. We camped together one night. I'd never seen him before and I didn't see him again. He said he wanted a letter to old Pete for some reason, so I scribbled him one in pencil on the back of an envelope. I've never met any one who played a better game of draw poker. He cleaned me out. There's a lot in that fellow, in spite of his looking like a musical comedy dude. He's clever."

Ann looked at him meditatively.

"It's odd that you should be discovering hidden virtues in Lord Wisbeach, father. I've been trying to make up my mind about him. He wants me to marry him."

"He does! I suppose a good many of these young fellows here want the same thing, don't they, Ann?" Mr. Chester looked at his daughter with interest. Her growing-up and becoming a beauty had always been a perplexity to him. He could never rid himself of the impression of her as a long-legged child in short skirts. "I suppose you're refusing them all the time?"

"Every day from ten to four, with an hour off for lunch. I keep regular office hours. Admission on presentation of visiting card."

"And how do you feel about this Lord Wisbeach?"

"I don't know," said Ann frankly. "He's very nice. And--what is more important--he's different. Most of the men I know are all turned out of the same mould. Lord Wisbeach--and one other man--are the only two I've met who might not be the brothers of all the rest."

"Who's the other?"

"A man I hardly know. I met him on board ship--"

Mr. Chester looked at his watch.

"It's up to you, Ann," he said. "There's one comfort in being

your father--I don't mean that exactly; I mean that it is a comfort to me AS your father--to know that I need feel no paternal anxiety about you. I don't have to give you advice. You've not only got three times the sense that I have, but you're not the sort of girl who would take advice. You've always known just what you wanted ever since you were a kid. . . . Well, if you're going to take me down to the boat, we'd better be starting. Where's the car?"

"Waiting outside. Aren't you going to say good-bye to aunt Nesta?"

"Good God, no!" exclaimed Mr. Chester in honest concern. "What! Plunge into that pack of coyotes and fight my way through to her! I'd be torn to pieces by wild poets. Besides, it seems silly to make a fuss saying good-bye when I'm only going to be away a short time. I shan't go any further than Colombia this trip."

"You'll be able to run back for week-ends," said Ann.

She paused at the door to cast a fleeting glance over her shoulder at the fair-haired Lord Wisbeach, who was now in animated conversation with her aunt and Willie Partridge; then she followed her father down the stairs. She was a little thoughtful as she took her place at the wheel of her automobile. It was not often that her independent nature craved outside

support, but she was half conscious of wishing at the present juncture that she possessed a somewhat less casual father. She would have liked to ask him to help her decide a problem which had been vexing her for nearly three weeks now, ever since Lord Wisbeach had asked her to marry him and she had promised to give him his answer on her return from England. She had been back in New York several days now, but she had not been able to make up her mind. This annoyed her, for she was a girl who liked swift decisiveness of thought and action both in others and in herself. She was fond of Mr. Chester in much the same unemotional, detached way that he was fond of her, but she was perfectly well aware of the futility of expecting counsel from him. She said good-bye to him at the boat, fussed over his comfort for awhile in a motherly way, and then drove slowly back. For the first time in her life she was feeling uncertain of herself. When she had left for England, she had practically made up her mind to accept Lord Wisbeach, and had only deferred actual acceptance of him because in her cool way she wished to re-examine the position at her leisure. Second thoughts had brought no revulsion of feeling. She had not wavered until her arrival in New York. Then, for some reason which baffled her, the idea of marrying Lord Wisbeach had become vaguely distasteful. And now she found herself fluctuating between this mood and her former one.

She reached the house on Riverside Drive, but did not slacken the speed of the machine. She knew that Lord Wisbeach would be



waiting for her there, and she did not wish to meet him just yet. She wanted to be alone. She was feeling depressed. She wondered if this was because she had just departed from her father, and decided that it was. His swift entrances into and exits from her life always left her temporarily restless. She drove on up the river. She meant to decide her problem one way or the other before she returned home.

Lord Wisbeach, meanwhile, was talking to Mrs. Pett and Willie, its inventor, about Partridgite. Willie, on hearing himself addressed, had turned slowly with an air of absent self-importance, the air of a great thinker disturbed in mid-thought. He always looked like that when spoken to, and there were those--Mr. Pett belonged to this school of thought--who held that there was nothing to him beyond that look and that he had built up his reputation as a budding mastermind on a foundation that consisted entirely of a vacant eye, a mop of hair through which he could run his fingers, and the fame of his late father.

Willie Partridge was the son of the great inventor, Dwight Partridge, and it was generally understood that the explosive, Partridgite, was to be the result of a continuation of experiments which his father had been working upon at the time of his death. That Dwight Partridge had been trying experiments in the direction of a new and powerful explosive during the last year of his life was common knowledge in those circles which are

interested in such things. Foreign governments were understood to have made tentative overtures to him. But a sudden illness, ending fatally, had finished the budding career of Partridgite abruptly, and the world had thought no more of it until an interview in the Sunday Chronicle, that store-house of information about interesting people, announced that Willie was carrying on his father's experiments at the point where he had left off. Since then there had been vague rumours of possible sensational developments, which Willie had neither denied nor confirmed. He preserved the mysterious silence which went so well with his appearance.

Having turned slowly so that his eyes rested on Lord Wisbeach's ingenuous countenance, Willie paused, and his face assumed the expression of his photograph in the Chronicle.

"Ah, Wisbeach!" he said.

Lord Wisbeach did not appear to resent the patronage of his manner. He plunged cheerily into talk. He had a pleasant, simple way of comporting himself which made people like him.

"I was just telling Mrs. Pett," he said, "that I shouldn't be surprised if you were to get an offer for your stuff from our fellows at home before long. I saw a lot of our War Office men when I was in England, don't you know. Several of them mentioned

the stuff."

Willie resented Partridgite as being referred to as "the stuff," but he made allowance. All Englishmen talked that way, he supposed.

"Indeed?" he said.

"Of course," said Mrs. Pett, "Willie is a patriot and would have to give our own authorities the first chance."

"Rather!"

"But you know what officials are all over the world. They are so sceptical and they move so slowly."

"I know. Our men at home are just the same as a rule. I've got a pal who invented something-or-other, I forget what, but it was a most decent little contrivance and very useful and all that; and he simply can't get them to say Yes or No about it. But, all the same, I wonder you didn't have some of them trying to put out feelers to you when you were in London."

"Oh, we were only in London a few hours. By the way, Lord Wisbeach, my sister--"--Mrs. Pett paused; she disliked to have to mention her sister or to refer to this subject at all, but

curiosity impelled her--"my sister said that you are a great friend of her step-son, James Crocker. I didn't know that you knew him."

Lord Wisbeach seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"He's not coming over, is he? Pity! It would have done him a world of good. Yes, Jimmy Crocker and I have always been great pals. He's a bit of a nut, of course, . . . I beg your pardon! . . . I mean . . ." He broke off confusedly, and turned to Willie again to cover himself. "How are you getting on with the jolly old stuff?" he asked.

If Willie had objected to Partridgite being called "the stuff," he was still less in favour of its being termed "the jolly old stuff." He replied coldly.

"I have ceased to get along with the jolly old stuff."

"Struck a snag?" enquired Lord Wisbeach sympathetically.

"On the contrary, my experiments have been entirely successful. I have enough Partridgite in my laboratory to blow New York to bits!"

"Willie!" exclaimed Mrs. Pett. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

You know I am so interested."

"I only completed my work last night."

He moved off with an important nod. He was tired of Lord Wisbeach's society. There was something about the young man which he did not like. He went to find more congenial company in a group by the window.

Lord Wisbeach turned to his hostess. The vacuous expression had dropped from his face like a mask. A pair of keen and intelligent eyes met Mrs. Pett's.

"Mrs. Pett, may I speak to you seriously?"

Mrs. Pett's surprise at the alteration in the man prevented her from replying. Much as she liked Lord Wisbeach, she had never given him credit for brains, and it was a man with brains and keen ones who was looking at her now. She nodded.

"If your nephew has really succeeded in his experiments, you should be awfully careful. That stuff ought not to lie about in his laboratory, though no doubt he has hidden it as carefully as possible. It ought to be in a safe somewhere. In that safe in your library. News of this kind moves like lightning. At this very moment, there may be people watching for a chance of getting

at the stuff."

Every nerve in Mrs. Pett's body, every cell of a brain which had for years been absorbing and giving out sensational fiction, quivered irrepressibly at these words, spoken in a low, tense voice which gave them additional emphasis. Never had she misjudged a man as she had misjudged Lord Wisbeach.

"Spies?" she quavered.

"They wouldn't call themselves that," said Lord Wisbeach. "Secret Service agents. Every country has its men whose only duty it is to handle this sort of work."

"They would try to steal Willie's--?" Mrs. Pett's voice failed.

"They would not look on it as stealing. Their motives would be patriotic. I tell you, Mrs. Pett, I have heard stories from friends of mine in the English Secret Service which would amaze you. Perfectly straight men in private life, but absolutely unscrupulous when at work. They stick at nothing--nothing. If I were you, I should suspect every one, especially every stranger." He smiled engagingly. "You are thinking that that is odd advice from one who is practically a stranger like myself. Never mind. Suspect me, too, if you like. Be on the safe side."

"I would not dream of doing such a thing, Lord Wisbeach," said Mrs. Pett horrified. "I trust you implicitly. Even supposing such a thing were possible, would you have warned me like this, if you had been--?"

"That's true," said Lord Wisbeach. "I never thought of that. Well, let me say, suspect everybody but me." He stopped abruptly. "Mrs. Pett," he whispered, "don't look round for a moment. Wait." The words were almost inaudible. "Who is that man behind you? He has been listening to us. Turn slowly."

With elaborate carelessness, Mrs. Pett turned her head. At first she thought her companion must have alluded to one of a small group of young men who, very improperly in such surroundings, were discussing with raised voices the prospects of the clubs competing for the National League Baseball Pennant. Then, extending the sweep of her gaze, she saw that she had been mistaken. Midway between her and this group stood a single figure, the figure of a stout man in a swallow-tail suit, who bore before him a tray with cups on it. As she turned, this man caught her eye, gave a guilty start, and hurried across the room.

"You saw?" said Lord Wisbeach. "He was listening. Who is that man? Your butler apparently. What do you know of him?"

"He is my new butler. His name is Skinner."

"Ah, your new butler? He hasn't been with you long, then?"

"He only arrived from England three days ago."

"From England? How did he get in here? I mean, on whose recommendation?"

"Mr. Pett offered him the place when we met him at my sister's in London. We went over there to see my sister, Eugenia--Mrs. Crocker. This man was the butler who admitted us. He asked Mr. Pett something about baseball, and Mr. Pett was so pleased that he offered him a place here if he wanted to come over. The man did not give any definite answer then, but apparently he sailed on the next boat, and came to the house a few days after we had returned."

Lord Wisbeach laughed softly.

"Very smart. Of course they had him planted there for the purpose."

"What ought I to do?" asked Mrs. Pett agitatedly.

"Do nothing. There is nothing that you can do, for the present, except keep your eyes open. Watch this man Skinner. See if he has



any accomplices. It is hardly likely that he is working alone.  
Suspect everybody. Believe me . . ."

At this moment, apparently from some upper region, there burst forth an uproar so sudden and overwhelming that it might well have been taken for a premature testing of a large sample of Partridgite; until a moment later it began to resemble more nearly the shrieks of some partially destroyed victim of that death-dealing invention. It was a bellow of anguish, and it poured through the house in a cascade of sound, advertising to all beneath the roof the twin facts that some person unknown was suffering and that whoever the sufferer might be he had excellent lungs.

The effect on the gathering in the drawing-room was immediate and impressive. Conversation ceased as if it had been turned off with a tap. Twelve separate and distinct discussions on twelve highly intellectual topics died instantaneously. It was as if the last trump had sounded. Futurist painters stared pallidly at vers libre poets, speech smitten from their lips; and stage performers looked at esoteric Buddhists with a wild surmise.

The sudden silence had the effect of emphasising the strange noise and rendering it more distinct, thus enabling it to carry its message to one at least of the listeners. Mrs. Pett, after a moment of strained attention in which time seemed to her to stand

still, uttered a wailing cry and leaped for the door.

"Ogden!" she shrilled; and passed up the stairs two at a time, gathering speed as she went. A boy's best friend is his mother.