

CHAPTER XII

JIMMY CATCHES THE BOSS'S EYE

When Jimmy arrived at Mr. Pett's office on Pine Street at ten-thirty the next morning--his expressed intention of getting up early enough to be there by nine having proved an empty boast--he was in a high state of preparedness. He had made ready for what might be a trying interview by substituting a combination of well-chosen dishes at an expensive hotel for the less imaginative boarding-house breakfast with which he had of late been insulting his interior. His suit was pressed, his shoes gleamed brightly, and his chin was smoothly shaven. These things, combined with the perfection of the morning and that vague exhilaration which a fine day in down-town New York brings to the man who has not got to work, increased his natural optimism. Something seemed to tell him that all would be well. He would have been the last person to deny that his position was a little complicated--he had to use a pencil and a sheet of paper to show himself just where he stood--but what of that? A few complications in life are an excellent tonic for the brain. It was with a sunny geniality which startled that unaccustomed stripling considerably--and indeed caused him to swallow his chewing gum--that he handed in his card to Mr. Pett's watchfully waiting office-boy.

"This to the boss, my open-faced lad!" he said. "Get swiftly off the mark."

The boy departed dumbly.

From where he stood, outside the barrier which separated visitors to the office from the workers within, Jimmy could see a vista of efficient-looking young men with paper protectors round their cuffs working away at mysterious jobs which seemed to involve the use of a great deal of paper. One in particular was so surrounded by it that he had the appearance of a bather in surf. Jimmy eyed these toilers with a comfortable and kindly eye. All this industry made him feel happy. He liked to think of this sort of thing going on all round him.

The office-boy returned. "This way, please."

The respectfulness of the lad's manner had increased noticeably. Mr. Pett's reception of the visitor's name had impressed him. It was an odd fact that the financier, a cipher in his own home, could impress all sorts of people at the office.

To Mr. Pett, the announcement that Mr. James Crocker was waiting to see him had come like the announcement of a miracle. Not a day had passed since their return to America without lamentations from Mrs. Pett on the subject of their failure to secure the

young man's person. The occasion of Mrs. Pett's reading of the article in the Sunday Chronicle descriptive of the Lord Percy Whipple affair had been unique in the little man's domestic history. For the first time since he had known her the indomitable woman had completely broken down. Of all sad words of tongue or pen the saddest are these "It might have been!" and the thought that, if she had only happened to know it, she had had in her hands during that interview with her sister in London a weapon which would have turned defeat into triumph was more than even Mrs. Pett's strong spirit could endure. When she looked back on that scene and recalled the airy way in which Mrs. Crocker had spoken of her step-son's "best friend, Lord Percy Whipple" and realised that at that very moment Lord Percy had been recovering in bed from the effects of his first meeting with Jimmy Crocker, the iron entered into her soul and she refused to be comforted. In the first instant of realisation she thought of six separate and distinct things she could have said to her sister, each more crushing than the last--things which now she would never be able to say.

And now, suddenly and unaccountably, the means was at hand for restoring her to her tranquil self-esteem. Jimmy Crocker, despite what his stepmother had said, probably in active defiance of her commands, had come to America after all. Mr. Pett's first thought was that his wife would, as he expressed it to himself, be "tickled to death about this." Scarcely waiting for the

office-boy to retire, he leaped towards Jimmy like a gambolling lamb and slapped him on the back with every evidence of joy and friendliness.

"My dear boy!" he cried. "My dear boy! I'm delighted to see you!"

Jimmy was surprised, relieved, and pleased. He had not expected this warmth. A civil coldness had been the best he had looked for. He had been given to understand that in the Pett home he was regarded as the black sheep: and, while one may admit a black sheep into the fold, it does not follow that one must of necessity fawn upon him.

"You're very kind," he said, rather startled.

They inspected each other for a brief moment. Mr. Pett was thinking that Jimmy was a great improvement on the picture his imagination had drawn of him. He had looked for something tougher, something flashy and bloated. Jimmy, for his part, had taken an instant liking to the financier. He, too, had been misled by imagination. He had always supposed that these millionaires down Wall Street way were keen, aggressive fellows, with gimlet eyes and sharp tongues. On the boat he had only seen Mr. Pett from afar, and had had no means of estimating his character. He found him an agreeable little man.

"We had given up all hope of your coming," said Mr. Pett.

A little manly penitence seemed to Jimmy to be in order.

"I never expected you would receive me like this. I thought I must have made myself rather unpopular."

Mr. Pett buried the past with a gesture.

"When did you land?" he asked.

"This morning. On the Caronia . . ."

"Good passage?"

"Excellent."

There was a silence. It seemed to Jimmy that Mr. Pett was looking at him rather more closely than was necessary for the actual enjoyment of his style of beauty. He was just about to throw out some light remark about the health of Mrs. Pett or something about porpoises on the voyage to add local colour and verisimilitude, when his heart missed a beat, as he perceived that he had made a blunder. Like many other amateur plotters, Ann and he had made the mistake of being too elaborate. It had struck them as an ingenious idea for Jimmy to pretend that he had

arrived that morning, and superficially it was a good idea: but he now remembered for the first time that, if he had seen Mr. Pett on the Atlantic, the probability was that Mr. Pett had seen him. The next moment the other had confirmed this suspicion.

"I've an idea I've seen you before. Can't think where."

"Everybody well at home?" said Jimmy.

"I'm sure of it."

"I'm looking forward to seeing them all."

"I've seen you some place."

"I'm often there."

"Eh?"

Mr. Pett seemed to be turning this remark over in his mind a trifle suspiciously. Jimmy changed the subject.

"To a young man like myself," he said, "with life opening out before him, there is something singularly stimulating in the sight of a modern office. How busy those fellows seem!"

"Yes," said Mr. Pett. "Yes." He was glad that this conversational note had been struck. He was anxious to discuss the future with this young man.

"Everybody works but father!" said Jimmy.

Mr. Pett started.

"Eh?"

"Nothing."

Mr. Pett was vaguely ruffled. He suspected insult, but could not pin it down. He abandoned his cheeriness, however, and became the man of business.

"I hope you intend to settle down, now that you are here, and work hard," he said in the voice which he vainly tried to use on Ogden at home.

"Work!" said Jimmy blankly.

"I shall be able to make a place for you in my office. That was my promise to your step-mother, and I shall fulfil it."

"But wait a minute! I don't get this! Do you mean to put me to

work?"

"Of course. I take it that that was why you came over here, because you realised how you were wasting your life and wanted a chance of making good in my office."

A hot denial trembled on Jimmy's tongue. Never had he been so misjudged. And then the thought of Ann checked him. He must do nothing that would interfere with Ann's plans. Whatever the cost, he must conciliate this little man. For a moment he mused sentimentally on Ann. He hoped she would understand what he was going through for her sake. To a man with his ingrained distaste for work in any shape the sight of those wage-slaves outside there in the outer office had, as he had told Mr. Pett, been stimulating: but only because it filled him with a sort of spiritual uplift to think that he had not got to do that sort of thing. Consider them in the light of fellow-workers, and the spectacle ceased to stimulate and became nauseating. And for her sake he was about to become one of them! Had any knight of old ever done anything as big as that for his lady? He very much doubted it.

"All right," he said. "Count me in. I take it that I shall have a job like one of those out there?"

"Yes."

"Not presuming to dictate, I suggest that you give me something that will take some of the work off that fellow who's swimming in paper. Only the tip of his nose was above the surface as I passed through. I never saw so many fellows working so hard at the same time in my life. All trying to catch the boss's eye, too, I suppose? It must make you feel like a snipe."

Mr. Pett replied stiffly. He disliked this levity on the sacred subject of office work. He considered that Jimmy was not approaching his new life in the proper spirit. Many young men had discussed with him in that room the subject of working in his employment, but none in quite the same manner.

"You are at a serious point in your career," he said. "You will have every opportunity of rising."

"Yes. At seven in the morning, I suppose?"

"A spirit of levity--" began Mr. Pett.

"I laugh that I may not weep," explained Jimmy. "Try to think what this means to a bright young man who loathes work. Be kind to me. Instruct your floor-walkers to speak gently to me at first. It may be a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done, but don't ask me to enjoy it! It's all right for you."

You're the boss. Any time you want to call it a day and go off and watch a ball-game, all you have to do is to leave word that you have an urgent date to see Mr. Rockefeller. Whereas I shall have to submerge myself in paper and only come up for air when the danger of suffocation becomes too great."

It may have been the mention of his favourite game that softened Mr. Pett. The frostiness which had crept into his manner thawed.

"It beats me," he said, "why you ever came over at all, if you feel like that."

"Duty!" said Jimmy. "Duty! There comes a time in the life of every man when he must choose between what is pleasant and what is right."

"And that last fool-game of yours, that Lord Percy Whipple business, must have made London pretty hot for you?" suggested Mr. Pett.

"Your explanation is less romantic than mine, but there is something in what you say."

"Had it occurred to you, young man, that I am taking a chance putting a fellow like you to work in my office?"

"Have no fear. The little bit of work I shall do won't make any difference."

"I've half a mind to send you straight back to London."

"Couldn't we compromise?"

"How?"

"Well, haven't you some snug secretarial job you could put me into? I have an idea that I should make an ideal secretary."

"My secretaries work."

"I get you. Cancel the suggestion."

Mr. Pett rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"You puzzle me. And that's the truth."

"Always speak the truth," said Jimmy approvingly.

"I'm darned if I know what to do with you. Well, you'd better come home with me now, anyway, and meet your aunt, and then we can talk things over. After all, the main thing is to keep you out of mischief."

"You put things crudely, but no doubt you are right."

"You'll live with us, of course."

"Thank you very much. This is the right spirit."

"I'll have to talk to Nesta about you. There may be something you can do."

"I shouldn't mind being a partner," suggested Jimmy helpfully.

"Why don't you get work on a paper again? You used to do that well."

"I don't think my old paper would welcome me now. They regard me rather as an entertaining news-item than a worker."

"That's true. Say, why on earth did you make such a fool of yourself over on the other side? That breach-of-promise case with the barmaid!" said Mr. Pett reproachfully.

"Let bygones be bygones," said Jimmy. "I was more sinned against than sinning. You know how it is, uncle Petel!" Mr. Pett started violently, but said nothing. "You try out of pure goodness of heart to scatter light and sweetness and protect the poor

working-girl--like Heaven--and brighten up her lot and so on, and she turns right around and soaks it to you good! And anyway she wasn't a barmaid. She worked in a florist's shop."

"I don't see that that makes any difference."

"All the difference in the world, all the difference between the sordid and the poetical. I don't know if you have ever experienced the hypnotic intoxication of a florist's shop? Take it from me, uncle Pete, any girl can look an angel as long as she is surrounded by choice blooms. I couldn't help myself. I wasn't responsible. I only woke up when I met her outside. But all that sort of thing is different now. I am another man. Sober, steady, serious-minded!"

Mr. Pett had taken the receiver from the telephone and was talking to some one. The buzzing of a feminine voice came to Jimmy's ears. Mr. Pett hung up the receiver.

"Your aunt says we are to come up at once."

"I'm ready. And it will be a good excuse for you to knock off work. I bet you're glad I came! Does the carriage await or shall we take the subway?"

"I guess it will be quicker to take the subway. Your aunt's very

surprised that you are here, and very pleased."

"I'm making everybody happy to-day."

Mr. Pett was looking at him in a meditative way. Jimmy caught his eye.

"You're registering something, uncle Pete, and I don't know what it is. Why the glance?"

"I was just thinking of something."

"Jimmy," prompted his nephew.

"Eh?"

"Add the word Jimmy to your remarks. It will help me to feel at home and enable me to overcome my shyness."

Mr. Pett chuckled.

"Shyness! If I had your nerve--!" He broke off with a sigh and looked at Jimmy affectionately. "What I was thinking was that you're a good boy. At least, you're not, but you're different from that gang of--of--that crowd up-town."

"What crowd?"

"Your aunt is literary, you know. She's filled the house with poets and that sort of thing. It will be a treat having you around. You're human! I don't see that we're going to make much of you now that you're here, but I'm darned glad you've come, Jimmy!"

"Put it there, uncle Pete!" said Jimmy. "You're all right. You're the finest Captain of Industry I ever met!"