

CHAPTER XIII

SLIGHT COMPLICATIONS

They left the subway at Ninety-sixth Street and walked up the Drive. Jimmy, like every one else who saw it for the first time, experienced a slight shock at the sight of the Pett mansion, but, rallying, followed his uncle up the flagged path to the front door.

"Your aunt will be in the drawing-room, I guess," said Mr. Pett, opening the door with his key.

Jimmy was looking round him appreciatively. Mr. Pett's house might be an eyesore from without, but inside it had had the benefit of the skill of the best interior decorator in New York.

"A man could be very happy in a house like this, if he didn't have to poison his days with work," said Jimmy.

Mr. Pett looked alarmed.

"Don't go saying anything like that to your aunt!" he urged. "She thinks you have come to settle down."

"So I have. I'm going to settle down like a limpet. I hope I

shall be living in luxury on you twenty years from now. Is this the room?"

Mr. Pett opened the drawing-room door. A small hairy object sprang from a basket and stood yapping in the middle of the room. This was Aida, Mrs. Pett's Pomeranian. Mr. Pett, avoiding the animal coldly, for he disliked it, ushered Jimmy into the room.

"Here's Jimmy Crocker, Nesta."

Jimmy was aware of a handsome woman of middle age, so like his step-mother that for an instant his self-possession left him and he stammered.

"How--how do you do?"

His demeanour made a favourable impression on Mrs. Pett. She took it for the decent confusion of remorse.

"I was very surprised when your uncle telephoned me," she said.

"I had not the slightest idea that you were coming over. I am very glad to see you."

"Thank you."

"This is your cousin, Ogden."

Jimmy perceived a fat boy lying on a settee. He had not risen on Jimmy's entrance, and he did not rise now. He did not even lower the book he was reading.

"Hello," he said.

Jimmy crossed over to the settee, and looked down on him. He had got over his momentary embarrassment, and, as usual with him, the reaction led to a fatal breeziness. He prodded Ogden in his well-covered ribs, producing a yelp of protest from that astounded youth.

"So this is Ogden! Well, well, well! You don't grow up, Ogden, but you do grow out. What are you--a perfect sixty-six?"

The favourable impression which Mrs. Pett had formed of her nephew waned. She was shocked by this disrespectful attitude towards the child she worshipped.

"Please do not disturb Ogden, James," she said stiffly. "He is not feeling very well to-day. His stomach is weak."

"Been eating too much?" said Jimmy cheerfully.

"I was just the same at his age. What he wants is half rations

and plenty of exercise."

"Say!" protested Ogden.

"Just look at this," proceeded Jimmy, grasping a handful of superfluous tissue around the boy's ribs. "All that ought to come off. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll buy a pair of flannel trousers and a sweater and some sneakers, and I'll take him for a run up Riverside Drive this evening. Do him no end of good. And a good skipping-rope, too. Nothing like it. In a couple of weeks I'll have him as fit as a--"

"Ogden's case," said Mrs. Pett coldly, "which is very complicated, is in the hands of Doctor Briginshaw, in whom we have every confidence."

There was a silence, the paralysing effects of which Mr. Pett vainly tried to mitigate by shuffling his feet and coughing. Mrs. Pett spoke.

"I hope that, now that you are here, James, you intend to settle down and work hard."

"Indubitably. Like a beaver," said Jimmy, mindful of Mr. Pett's recent warning. "The only trouble is that there seems to be a little uncertainty as to what I am best fitted for. We talked it

over in uncle Pete's office and arrived at no conclusion."

"Can't you think of anything?" said Mr. Pett.

"I looked right through the telephone classified directory the other day--"

"The other day? But you only landed this morning."

"I mean this morning. When I was looking up your address so that I could go and see you," said Jimmy glibly. "It seems a long time ago. I think the sight of all those fellows in your office has aged me. I think the best plan would be for me to settle down here and learn how to be an electrical engineer or something by mail. I was reading an advertisement in a magazine as we came up on the subway. I see they guarantee to teach you anything from sheet metal working to poultry raising. The thing began 'You are standing still because you lack training.' It seemed to me to apply to my case exactly. I had better drop them a line to-night asking for a few simple facts about chickens."

Whatever comment Mrs. Pett might have made on this suggestion was checked by the entrance of Ann. From the window of her room Ann had observed the arrival of Jimmy and her uncle, and now, having allowed sufficient time to elapse for the former to make Mrs. Pett's acquaintance, she came down to see how things were going.

She was well satisfied with what she saw. A slight strain which she perceived in the atmosphere she attributed to embarrassment natural to the situation.

She looked at Jimmy enquiringly. Mrs. Pett had not informed her of Mr. Pett's telephone call, so Jimmy, she realised, had to be explained to her. She waited for some one to say something.

Mr. Pett undertook the introduction.

"Jimmy, this is my niece, Ann Chester. This is Jimmy Crocker, Ann."

Jimmy could not admire sufficiently the start of surprise which she gave. It was artistic and convincing.

"Jimmy Crocker!"

Mr. Pett was on the point of mentioning that this was not the first time Ann had met Jimmy, but refrained. After all, that interview had happened five years ago. Jimmy had almost certainly forgotten all about it. There was no use in making him feel unnecessarily awkward. It was up to Ann. If she wanted to disinter the ancient grievance, let her. It was no business of his.

"I thought you weren't coming over!" said Ann.

"I changed my mind."

Mr. Pett, who had been gazing attentively at them, uttered an exclamation.

"I've got it! I've been trying all this while to think where it was that I saw you before. It was on the Atlantic!"

Ann caught Jimmy's eye. She was relieved to see that he was not disturbed by this sudden development.

"Did you come over on the Atlantic, Mr. Crocker?" she said.

"Surely not? We crossed on her ourselves. We should have met."

"Don't call me Mr. Crocker," said Jimmy. "Call me Jimmy. Your mother's brother's wife's sister's second husband is my father. Blood is thicker than water. No, I came over on the Caronia. We docked this morning."

"Well, there was a fellow just like you on the Atlantic," persisted Mr. Pett.

Mrs. Pett said nothing. She was watching Jimmy with a keen and

suspicious eye.

"I suppose I'm a common type," said Jimmy.

"You remember the man I mean," said Mr. Pett, innocently unconscious of the unfriendly thoughts he was encouraging in two of his hearers. "He sat two tables away from us at meals. You remember him, Nesta?"

"As I was too unwell to come to meals, I do not."

"Why, I thought I saw you once talking to him on deck, Ann."

"Really?" said Ann. "I don't remember any one who looked at all like Jimmy."

"Well," said Mr. Pett, puzzled. "It's very strange. I guess I'm wrong." He looked at his watch. "Well, I'll have to be getting back to the office."

"I'll come with you part of the way, uncle Pete," said Jimmy. "I have to go and arrange for my things to be expressed here."

"Why not phone to the hotel?" said Mr. Pett. It seemed to Jimmy and Ann that he was doing this sort of thing on purpose. "Which hotel did you leave them at?"

"No, I shall have to go there. I have some packing to do."

"You will be back to lunch?" said Ann.

"Thanks. I shan't be gone more than half an hour."

For a moment after they had gone, Ann relaxed, happy and relieved. Everything had gone splendidly. Then a shock ran through her whole system as Mrs. Pett spoke. She spoke excitedly, in a lowered voice, leaning over to Ann.

"Ann! Did you notice anything? Did you suspect anything?"

Ann mastered her emotion with an effort.

"Whatever do you mean, aunt Nesta?"

"About that young man, who calls himself Jimmy Crocker."

Ann clutched the side of the chair.

"Who calls himself Jimmy Crocker? I don't understand."

Ann tried to laugh. It seemed to her an age before she produced any sound at all, and when it came it was quite unlike a laugh.

"What put that idea into your head? Surely, if he says he is Jimmy Crocker, it's rather absurd to doubt him, isn't it? How could anybody except Jimmy Crocker know that you were anxious to get Jimmy Crocker over here? You didn't tell any one, did you?"

This reasoning shook Mrs. Pett a little, but she did not intend to abandon a perfectly good suspicion merely because it began to seem unreasonable.

"They have their spies everywhere," she said doggedly.

"Who have?"

"The Secret Service people from other countries. Lord Wisbeach was telling me about it yesterday. He said that I ought to suspect everybody. He said that an attempt might be made on Willie's invention at any moment now."

"He was joking."

"He was not. I have never seen any one so serious. He said that I ought to regard every fresh person who came into the house as a possible criminal."

"Well, that guy's fresh enough," muttered Ogden from the settee.

Mrs. Pett started.

"Ogden! I had forgotten that you were there." She uttered a cry of horror, as the fact of his presence started a new train of thought. "Why, this man may have come to kidnap you! I never thought of that."

Ann felt it time to intervene. Mrs. Pett was hovering much too near the truth for comfort. "You mustn't imagine things, aunt Nesta. I believe it comes from writing the sort of stories you do. Surely, it is impossible for this man to be an impostor. How would he dare take such a risk? He must know that you could detect him at any moment by cabling over to Mrs. Crocker to ask if her step-son was really in America."

It was a bold stroke, for it suggested a plan of action which, if followed, would mean ruin for her schemes, but Ann could not refrain from chancing it. She wanted to know whether her aunt had any intention of asking Mrs. Crocker for information, or whether the feud was too bitter for her pride to allow her to communicate with her sister in any way. She breathed again as Mrs. Pett stiffened grimly in her chair.

"I should not dream of cabling to Eugenia."

"I quite understand that," said Ann. "But an impostor would not know that you felt like that, would he?"

"I see what you mean."

Ann relaxed again. The relief was, however, only momentary.

"I cannot understand, though," said Mrs. Pett, "why your uncle should have been so positive that he saw this young man on the Atlantic."

"Just a chance resemblance, I suppose. Why, uncle Peter said he saw the man whom he imagined was like Jimmy Crocker talking to me. If there had been any real resemblance, shouldn't I have seen it before uncle Peter?"

Assistance came from an unexpected quarter.

"I know the chap uncle Peter meant," said Ogden. "He wasn't like this guy at all."

Ann was too grateful for the help to feel astonished at it. Her mind, dwelling for a mere instant on the matter, decided that Ogden must have seen her on deck with somebody else than Jimmy. She had certainly not lacked during the voyage for those who sought her society.

Mrs. Pett seemed to be impressed.

"I may be letting my imagination run away with me," she said.

"Of course you are, aunt Nesta," said Ann thankfully. "You don't realise what a vivid imagination you have got. When I was typing that last story of yours, I was simply astounded at the ideas you had thought of. I remember saying so to uncle Peter. You can't expect to have a wonderful imagination like yours and not imagine things, can you?"

Mrs. Pett smiled demurely. She looked hopefully at her niece, waiting for more, but Ann had said her say.

"You are perfectly right, my dear child," she said when she was quite sure the eulogy was not to be resumed. "No doubt I have been foolish to suspect this young man. But Lord Wisbeach's words naturally acted more strongly on a mind like mine than they would have done in the case of another woman."

"Of course," said Ann.

She was feeling quite happy now. It had been tense while it had lasted, but everything was all right now.

"And, fortunately," said Mrs. Pett, "there is a way by which we can find out for certain if the young man is really James Crocker."

Ann became rigid again.

"A way? What way?"

"Why, don't you remember, my dear, that Skinner has known James Crocker for years."

"Skinner?"

The name sounded familiar, but in the stress of the moment Ann could not identify it.

"My new butler. He came to me straight from Eugenia. It was he who let us in when we called at her house. Nobody could know better than he whether this person is really James Crocker or not."

Ann felt as if she had struggled to the limit of her endurance. She was not prepared to cope with this unexpected blow. She had not the strength to rally under it. Dully she perceived that her schemes must be dismissed as a failure before they had had a chance of success. Her accomplice must not return to the house to

be exposed. She saw that clearly enough. If he came back, he would walk straight into a trap. She rose quickly. She must warn him. She must intercept him before he arrived--and he might arrive at any moment now.

"Of course," she said, steadying herself with an effort, "I never thought of that. That makes it all simple. . . . I hope lunch won't be late. I'm hungry."

She sauntered to the door, but, directly she had closed it behind her, ran to her room, snatched up a hat, and rushed downstairs and out into Riverside Drive. Just as she reached the street, Jimmy turned the corner. She ran towards him, holding up her hands.