

CHAPTER XIV

LORD WISBEACH

Jimmy halted in his tracks. The apparition had startled him. He had been thinking of Ann, but he had not expected her to bound out at him, waving her arms.

"What's the matter?" he enquired.

Ann pulled him towards a side-street.

"You mustn't go to the house. Everything has gone wrong."

"Everything gone wrong? I thought I had made a hit. I have with your uncle, anyway. We parted on the friendliest terms. We have arranged to go to the ball-game together to-morrow. He is going to tell them at the office that Carnegie wants to see him."

"It isn't uncle Peter. It's aunt Nesta."

"Ah, there you touch my conscience. I was a little tactless, I'm afraid, with Ogden. It happened before you came into the room. I suppose that is the trouble?"

"It has nothing do with that," said Ann impatiently. "It's much

worse. Aunt Nesta is suspicious. She has guessed that you aren't really Jimmy Crocker."

"Great Scott! How?"

"I tried to calm her down, but she still suspects. So now she has decided to wait and see if Skinner, the butler, knows you. If he doesn't, she will know that she was right."

Jimmy was frankly puzzled.

"I don't quite follow the reasoning. Surely it's a peculiar kind of test. Why should she think a man cannot be honest and true unless her butler knows him? There must be hundreds of worthy citizens whom he does not know."

"Skinner arrived from England a few days ago. Until then he was employed by Mrs. Crocker. Now do you understand?"

Jimmy stopped. She had spoken slowly and distinctly, and there could be no possibility that he had misunderstood her, yet he scarcely believed that he had heard her aright. How could a man named Skinner have been his step-mother's butler? Bayliss had been with the family ever since they had arrived in London.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, of course I'm sure. Aunt Nesta told me herself. There can't possibly be a mistake, because it was Skinner who let her in when she called on Mrs. Crocker. Uncle Peter told me about it. He had a talk with the man in the hall and found that he was a baseball enthusiast--"

A wild, impossible idea flashed upon Jimmy. It was so absurd that he felt ashamed of entertaining it even for a moment. But strange things were happening these times, and it might be . . .

"What sort of looking man is Skinner?"

"Oh, stout, clean-shaven. I like him. He's much more human than I thought butlers ever were. Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Of course, you can't go back to the house. You see that? He would say that you aren't Jimmy Crocker and then you would be arrested."

"I don't see that. If I am sufficiently like Crocker for his friends to mistake me for him in restaurants, why shouldn't this butler mistake me, too?"

"But--?"

"And, consider. In any case, there's no harm done. If he fails to recognise me when he opens the door to us, we shall know that the game is up: and I shall have plenty of time to disappear. If the likeness deceives him, all will be well. I propose that we go to the house, ring the bell, and when he appears, I will say 'Ah, Skinner! Honest fellow!' or words to that effect. He will either stare blankly at me or fawn on me like a faithful watchdog. We will base our further actions on which way the butler jumps."

The sound of the bell died away. Footsteps were heard. Ann reached for Jimmy's arm and--clutched it.

"Now!" she whispered.

The door opened. Next moment Jimmy's suspicion was confirmed. Gaping at them from the open doorway, wonderfully respectable and butlerlike in swallow-tails, stood his father. How he came to be there, and why he was there, Jimmy did not know. But there he was.

Jimmy had little faith in his father's talents as a man of discretion. The elder Crocker was one of those simple, straight forward people who, when surprised, do not conceal their surprise, and who, not understanding any situation in which they

find themselves, demand explanation on the spot. Swift and immediate action was indicated on his part before his amazed parent, finding him on the steps of the one house in New York where he was least likely to be, should utter words that would undo everything. He could see the name Jimmy trembling on Mr. Crocker's lips.

He waved his hand cheerily.

"Ah, Skinner, there you are!" he said breezily. "Miss Chester was telling me that you had left my step-mother. I suppose you sailed on the boat before mine. I came over on the Caronia. I suppose you didn't expect to see me again so soon, eh?"

A spasm seemed to pass over Mr. Crocker's face, leaving it calm and serene. He had been thrown his cue, and like the old actor he was he took it easily and without confusion. He smiled a respectful smile.

"No, indeed, sir."

He stepped aside to allow them to enter. Jimmy caught Ann's eye as she passed him. It shone with relief and admiration, and it exhilarated Jimmy like wine. As she moved towards the stairs, he gave expression to his satisfaction by slapping his father on the back with a report that rang out like a pistol shot.

"What was that?" said Ann, turning.

"Something out on the Drive, I think," said Jimmy. "A car back-firing, I fancy, Skinner."

"Very probably, sir."

He followed Ann to the stairs. As he started to mount them, a faint whisper reached his ears.

"At-a-boy!"

It was Mr. Crocker's way of bestowing a father's blessing.

Ann walked into the drawing-room, her head high, triumph in the glance which she cast upon her unconscious aunt.

"Quite an interesting little scene downstairs, aunt Nesta," she said. "The meeting of the faithful old retainer and the young master. Skinner was almost overcome with surprise and joy when he saw Jimmy!"

Mrs. Pett could not check an incautious exclamation.

"Did Skinner recognise--?" she began; then stopped herself

abruptly.

Ann laughed.

"Did he recognise Jimmy? Of course! He was hardly likely to have forgotten him, surely? It isn't much more than a week since he was waiting on him in London."

"It was a very impressive meeting," said Jimmy. "Rather like the reunion of Ulysses and the hound Argos, of which this bright-eyed child here--" he patted Ogden on the head, a proceeding violently resented by that youth--"has no doubt read in the course of his researches into the Classics. I was Ulysses, Skinner enacted the role of the exuberant dog."

Mrs. Pett was not sure whether she was relieved or disappointed at this evidence that her suspicions had been without foundation. On the whole, relief may be said to have preponderated.

"I have no doubt he was pleased to see you again. He must have been very much astonished."

"He was!"

"You will be meeting another old friend in a minute or two," said Mrs. Pett.

Jimmy had been sinking into a chair. This remark stopped him in mid-descent.

"Another!"

Mrs. Pett glanced at the clock.

"Lord Wisbeach is coming to lunch."

"Lord Wisbeach!" cried Ann. "He doesn't know Jimmy."

"Eugenia informed me in London that he was one of your best friends, James."

Ann looked helplessly at Jimmy. She was conscious again of that feeling of not being able to cope with Fate's blows, of not having the strength to go on climbing over the barriers which Fate placed in her path.

Jimmy, for his part, was cursing the ill fortune that had brought Lord Wisbeach across his path. He saw clearly that it only needed recognition by one or two more intimates of Jimmy Crocker to make Ann suspect his real identity. The fact that she had seen him with Bayliss in Paddington Station and had fallen into the error of supposing Bayliss to be his father had kept her from

suspecting until now; but this could not last forever. He remembered Lord Wisbeach well, as a garrulous, irrepressible chatterer who would probably talk about old times to such an extent as to cause Ann to realise the truth in the first five minutes.

The door opened.

"Lord Wisbeach," announced Mr. Crocker.

"I'm afraid I'm late, Mrs. Pett," said his lordship.

"No. You're quite punctual. Lord Wisbeach, here is an old friend of yours, James Crocker."

There was an almost imperceptible pause. Then Jimmy stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Hello, Wizzy, old man!"

"H-hello, Jimmy!"

Their eyes met. In his lordship's there was an expression of unmistakable relief, mingled with astonishment. His face, which had turned a sickly white, flushed as the blood poured back into it. He had the appearance of a man who had had a bad shock and is

just getting over it. Jimmy, eyeing him curiously, was not surprised at his emotion. What the man's game might be, he could not say; but of one thing he was sure, which was that this was not Lord Wisbeach, but--on the contrary--some one he had never seen before in his life.

"Luncheon is served, madam!" said Mr. Crocker sonorously from the doorway.