

CHAPTER XV

A LITTLE BUSINESS CHAT

It was not often that Ann found occasion to rejoice at the presence in her uncle's house of the six geniuses whom Mrs. Pett had installed therein. As a rule, she disliked them individually and collectively. But to-day their company was extraordinarily welcome to her. They might have their faults, but at least their presence tended to keep the conversation general and prevent it becoming a duologue between Lord Wisbeach and Jimmy on the subject of old times. She was still feeling weak from the reaction consequent upon the slackening of the tension of her emotions on seeing Lord Wisbeach greet Jimmy as an old acquaintance. She had never hoped that that barrier would be surmounted. She had pictured Lord Wisbeach drawing back with a puzzled frown on his face and an astonished "But this is not Jimmy Crocker." The strain had left her relieved, but in no mood for conversation, and she replied absently to the remarks of Howard Bemis, the poet, who sat on her left. She looked round the table. Willie Partridge was talking to Mrs. Pett about the difference between picric acid and trinitrotoluene, than which a pleasanter topic for the luncheon table could hardly be selected, and the voice of Clarence Renshaw rose above all other competing noises, as he spoke of the functions of the trochaic spondee. There was nothing outwardly to distinguish this meal from any

other which she had shared of late in that house.

The only thing that prevented her relief being unmixed was the fact that she could see Lord Wisbeach casting furtive glances at Jimmy, who was eating with the quiet concentration of one who, after days of boarding-house fare, finds himself in the presence of the masterpieces of a chef. In the past few days Jimmy had consumed too much hash to worry now about anything like a furtive glance. He had perceived Lord Wisbeach's roving eye, and had no doubt that at the conclusion of the meal he would find occasion for a little chat. Meanwhile, however, his duty was towards his tissues and their restoration. He helped himself liberally from a dish which his father offered him.

He became aware that Mrs. Pett was addressing him.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Quite like old times," said Mrs. Pett genially. Her suspicions had vanished completely since Lord Wisbeach's recognition of the visitor, and remorse that she should have suspected him made her unwontedly amiable. "Being with Skinner again," she explained.

"It must remind you of London."

Jimmy caught his father's expressionless eye.

"Skinner's," he said handsomely, "is a character one cannot help but respect. His nature expands before one like some beautiful flower."

The dish rocked in Mr. Crocker's hand, but his face remained impassive.

"There is no vice in Skinner," proceeded Jimmy. "His heart is the heart of a little child."

Mrs. Pett looked at this paragon of the virtues in rather a startled way. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she was being laughed at. She began to dislike Jimmy again.

"For many years Skinner has been a father to me," said Jimmy.

"Who ran to help me when I fell, And would some pretty story tell, Or kiss the place to make it well? Skinner."

For all her suspense, Ann could not help warming towards an accomplice who carried off an unnerving situation with such a flourish. She had always regarded herself with a fair degree of complacency as possessed of no mean stock of courage and resource, but she could not have spoken then without betraying her anxiety. She thought highly of Jimmy, but all the same she could not help wishing that he would not make himself quite so conspicuous. Perhaps--the thought chilled her--perhaps he was

creating quite a new Jimmy Crocker, a character which would cause Skinner and Lord Wisbeach to doubt the evidence of their eyes and begin to suspect the truth. She wished she could warn him to simmer down, but the table was a large one and he and she were at opposite ends of it.

Jimmy, meanwhile, was thoroughly enjoying himself. He felt that he was being the little ray of sunshine about the home and making a good impression. He was completely happy. He liked the food, he liked seeing his father buttle, and he liked these amazing freaks who were, it appeared, fellow-inmates with him of this highly desirable residence. He wished that old Mr. Pett could have been present. He had conceived a great affection for Mr. Pett, and registered a mental resolve to lose no time in weaning him from his distressing habit of allowing the office to interfere with his pleasures. He was planning a little trip to the Polo Grounds, in which Mr. Pett, his father, and a number of pop bottles were to be his companions, when his reverie was interrupted by a sudden cessation of the buzz of talk. He looked up from his plate, to find the entire company regarding Willie Partridge open-mouthed. Willie, with gleaming eyes, was gazing at a small test-tube which he had produced from his pocket and placed beside his plate.

"I have enough in this test-tube," said Willie airily, "to blow half New York to bits."

The silence was broken by a crash in the background. Mr. Crocker had dropped a chafing-dish.

"If I were to drop this little tube like that," said Willie, using the occurrence as a topical illustration, "we shouldn't be here."

"Don't drop it," advised Jimmy. "What is it?"

"Partridgite!"

Mrs. Pett had risen from the table, with blanched face.

"Willie, how can you bring that stuff here? What are you thinking of?"

Willie smiles a patronising smile.

"There is not the slightest danger, aunt Nesta. It cannot explode without concussion. I have been carrying it about with me all the morning."

He bestowed on the test-tube the look a fond parent might give his favourite child. Mrs. Pett was not reassured.

"Go and put it in your uncle's safe at once. Put it away."

"I haven't the combination."

"Call your uncle up at once at the office and ask him."

"Very well. If you wish it, aunt Nesta. But there is no danger."

"Don't take that thing with you," screamed Mrs. Pett, as he rose.

"You might drop it. Come back for it."

"Very well."

Conversation flagged after Willie's departure. The presence of the test-tube seemed to act on the spirits of the company after the fashion of the corpse at the Egyptian banquet. Howard Bemis, who was sitting next to it, edged away imperceptibly till he nearly crowded Ann off her chair. Presently Willie returned. He picked up the test-tube, put it in his pocket with a certain jauntiness, and left the room again.

"Now, if you hear a sudden bang and find yourself disappearing through the roof," said Jimmy, "that will be it."

Willie returned and took his place at the table again. But the spirit had gone out of the gathering. The voice of Clarence

Renshaw was hushed, and Howard Bemis spoke no more of the influence of Edgar Lee Masters on modern literature. Mrs. Pett left the room, followed by Ann. The geniuses drifted away one by one. Jimmy, having lighted a cigarette and finished his coffee, perceived that he was alone with his old friend, Lord Wisbeach, and that his old friend Lord Wisbeach was about to become confidential.

The fair-haired young man opened the proceedings by going to the door and looking out. This done, he returned to his seat and gazed fixedly at Jimmy.

"What's your game?" he asked.

Jimmy returned his gaze blandly.

"My game?" he said. "What do you mean?"

"Can the coy stuff," urged his lordship brusquely. "Talk sense and talk it quick. We may be interrupted at any moment. What's your game? What are you here for?"

Jimmy raised his eyebrows.

"I am a prodigal nephew returned to the fold."

"Oh, quit your kidding. Are you one of Potter's lot?"

"Who is Potter?"

"You know who Potter is."

"On the contrary. My life has never been brightened by so much as a sight of Potter."

"Is that true?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you working on your own, then?"

"I am not working at all at present. There is some talk of my learning to be an Asparagus Adjuster by mail later on."

"You make me sick," said Lord Wisbeach. "Where's the sense of trying to pull this line of talk. Why not put your cards on the table? We've both got in here on the same lay, and there's no use fighting and balling the thing up."

"Do you wish me to understand," said Jimmy, "that you are not my old friend, Lord Wisbeach?"

"No. And you're not my old friend, Jimmy Crocker."

"What makes you think that?"

"If you had been, would you have pretended to recognise me upstairs just now? I tell you, pal, I was all in for a second, till you gave me the high sign."

Jimmy laughed.

"It would have been awkward for you if I really had been Jimmy Crocker, wouldn't it?"

"And it would have been awkward for you if I had really been Lord Wisbeach."

"Who are you, by the way?"

"The boys call me Gentleman Jack."

"Why?" asked Jimmy, surprised.

Lord Wisbeach ignored the question.

"I'm working with Burke's lot just now. Say, let's be sensible about this. I'll be straight with you, straight as a string."

"Did you say string or spring?"

"And I'll expect you to be straight with me."

"Are we to breathe confidences into each other's ears?"

Lord Wisbeach went to the door again and submitted the passage to a second examination.

"You seem nervous," said Jimmy.

"I don't like that butler. He's up to something."

"Do you think he's one of Potter's lot?"

"Shouldn't wonder. He isn't on the level, anyway, or why did he pretend to recognise you as Jimmy Crocker?"

"Recognition of me as Jimmy Crocker seems to be the acid test of honesty."

"He was in a tight place, same as I was," said Lord Wisbeach. "He couldn't know that you weren't really Jimmy Crocker until you put him wise--same as you did me--by pretending to know him." He looked at Jimmy with grudging admiration. "You'd got your nerve

with you, pal, coming in here like this. You were taking big chances. You couldn't have known you wouldn't run up against some one who really knew Jimmy Crocker. What would you have done if this butler guy had really been on the level?"

"The risks of the profession!"

"When I think of the work I had to put in," said Lord Wisbeach, "it makes me tired to think of some one else just walking in here as you did."

"What made you choose Lord Wisbeach as your alias?"

"I knew that I could get away with it. I came over on the boat with him, and I knew he was travelling round the world and wasn't going to stay more than a day in New York. Even then I had to go some to get into this place. Burke told me to get hold of old Chester and get a letter of introduction from him. And here you come along and just stroll in and tell them you have come to stay!" He brooded for a moment on the injustice of things.

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Pal?"

"About what?"

"About us both being here? Are you going to be sensible and work in with me and divvy up later on, or are you going to risk

spoiling everything by trying to hog the whole thing? I'll be square with you. It isn't as if there was any use in trying to bluff each other. We're both here for the same thing. You want to get hold of that powder stuff, that Partridgite, and so do I."

"You believe in Partridgite, then?"

"Oh, can it," said Lord Wisbeach disgustedly. "What's the use? Of course I believe in it. Burke's had his eye on the thing for a year. You've heard of Dwight Partridge, haven't you? Well, this guy's his son. Every one knows that Dwight Partridge was working on an explosive when he died, and here's his son comes along with a test-tube full of stuff which he says could blow this city to bits. What's the answer? The boy's been working on the old man's dope. From what I've seen of him, I guess there wasn't much more to be done on it, or he wouldn't have done it. He's pretty well dead from the neck up, as far as I can see. But that doesn't alter the fact that he's got the stuff and that you and I have got to get together and make a deal. If we don't, I'm not saying you mightn't gum my game, just as I might gum yours; but where's the sense in that? It only means taking extra chances. Whereas if we sit in together, there's enough in it for both of us. You know as well as I do that there's a dozen markets which'll bid against each other for stuff like that Partridgite. If you're worrying about Burke giving you a square deal, forget it. I'll fix Burke. He'll treat you nice, all right."

Jimmy ground the butt of his cigarette against his plate.

"I'm no orator, as Brutus is; but, as you know me all, a plain, blunt man. And, speaking in the capacity of a plain, blunt man, I rise to reply--Nothing doing."

"What? You won't come in?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Wizzy, if I may still call you that, but your offer fails to attract. I will not get together or sit in or anything else. On the contrary, I am about to go to Mrs. Pett and inform her that there is a snake in her Eden."

"You're not going to squeal on me?"

"At the top of my voice."

Lord Wisbeach laughed unpleasantly.

"Yes, you will," he said. "How are you going to explain why you recognised me as an old pal before lunch if I'm a crook after lunch. You can't give me away without giving yourself away. If I'm not Lord Wisbeach, then you're not Jimmy Crocker."

Jimmy sighed. "I get you. Life is very complex, isn't it?"

Lord Wisbeach rose.

"You'd better think it over, son," he said. "You aren't going to get anywhere by acting like a fool. You can't stop me going after this stuff, and if you won't come in and go fifty-fifty, you'll find yourself left. I'll beat you to it."

He left the room, and Jimmy, lighting a fresh cigarette, addressed himself to the contemplation of this new complication in his affairs. It was quite true what Gentleman Jack or Joe or whatever the "boys" called him had said. To denounce him meant denouncing himself. Jimmy smoked thoughtfully. Not for the first time he wished that his record during the past few years had been of a snowier character. He began to appreciate what must have been the feelings of Dr. Jekyll under the handicap of his disreputable second self, Mr. Hyde.