

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. PETT TAKES PRECAUTIONS

Mrs. Pett, on leaving the luncheon-table, had returned to the drawing-room to sit beside the sick-settee of her stricken child. She was troubled about Ogden. The poor lamb was not at all himself to-day. A bowl of clear soup, the midday meal prescribed by Doctor Briginshaw, lay untasted at his side.

She crossed the room softly, and placed a cool hand on her son's aching brow.

"Oh, Gee," said Ogden wearily.

"Are you feeling a little better, Oggie darling?"

"No," said Ogden firmly. "I'm feeling a lot worse."

"You haven't drunk your nice soup."

"Feed it to the cat."

"Could you eat a nice bowl of bread-and-milk, precious?"

"Have a heart," replied the sufferer.

Mrs. Pett returned to her seat, sorrowfully. It struck her as an odd coincidence that the poor child was nearly always like this on the morning after she had been entertaining guests; she put it down to the reaction from the excitement working on a highly-strung temperament. To his present collapse the brutal behaviour of Jerry Mitchell had, of course, contributed. Every drop of her maternal blood boiled with rage and horror whenever she permitted herself to contemplate the excesses of the late Jerry. She had always mistrusted the man. She had never liked his face--not merely on aesthetic grounds but because she had seemed to detect in it a lurking savagery. How right events had proved this instinctive feeling. Mrs. Pett was not vulgar enough to describe the feeling, even to herself, as a hunch, but a hunch it had been; and, like every one whose hunches have proved correct, she was conscious in the midst of her grief of a certain complacency. It seemed to her that hers must be an intelligence and insight above the ordinary.

The peace of the early afternoon settled upon the drawing-room. Mrs. Pett had taken up a book; Ogden, on the settee, breathed stentorously. Faint snores proceeded from the basket in the corner where Aida, the Pomeranian, lay curled in refreshing sleep. Through the open window floated sounds of warmth and Summer.

Yielding to the drowsy calm, Mrs. Pett was just nodding into a pleasant nap, when the door opened and Lord Wisbeach came in.

Lord Wisbeach had been doing some rapid thinking. Rapid thought is one of the essentials in the composition of men who are known as Gentleman Jack to the boys and whose livelihood is won only by a series of arduous struggles against the forces of Society and the machinations of Potter and his gang. Condensed into capsule form, his lordship's meditations during the minutes after he had left Jimmy in the dining-room amounted to the realisation that the best mode of defence is attack. It is your man who knows how to play the bold game on occasion who wins. A duller schemer than Lord Wisbeach might have been content to be inactive after such a conversation as had just taken place between himself and Jimmy. His lordship, giving the matter the concentrated attention of his trained mind, had hit on a better plan, and he had come to the drawing-room now to put it into effect.

His entrance shattered the peaceful atmosphere. Aida, who had been gurgling apoplectically, sprang snarling from the basket, and made for the intruder open-mouthed. Her shrill barking rang through the room.

Lord Wisbeach hated little dogs. He hated and feared them. Many men of action have these idiosyncrasies. He got behind a chair and said "There, there." Aida, whose outburst was mere sound and

fury and who had no intention whatever of coming to blows, continued the demonstration from a safe distance, till Mrs. Pett, swooping down, picked her up and held her in her lap, where she consented to remain, growling subdued defiance. Lord Wisbeach came out from behind his chair and sat down warily.

"Can I have a word with you, Mrs. Pett?"

"Certainly, Lord Wisbeach."

His lordship looked meaningly at Ogden.

"In private, you know."

He then looked meaningly at Mrs. Pett.

"Ogden darling," said Mrs. Pett, "I think you had better go to your room and undress and get into bed. A little nice sleep might do you all the good in the world."

With surprising docility, the boy rose.

"All right," he said.

"Poor Oggie is not at all well to-day," said Mrs. Pett, when he was gone. "He is very subject to these attacks. What do you want

to tell me, Lord Wisbeach?"

His lordship drew his chair a little closer.

"Mrs. Pett, you remember what I told you yesterday?"

"Of course."

"Might I ask what you know of this man who has come here calling himself Jimmy Crocker?"

Mrs. Pett started. She remembered that she had used almost that very expression to Ann. Her suspicions, which had been lulled by the prompt recognition of the visitor by Skinner and Lord Wisbeach, returned. It is one of the effects of a successful hunch that it breeds other hunches. She had been right about Jerry Mitchell; was she to be proved right about the self-styled Jimmy Crocker?

"You have seen your nephew, I believe?"

"Never. But--"

"That man," said Lord Wisbeach impassively, "is not your nephew."

Mrs. Pett thrilled all down her spine. She had been right.

"But you--"

"But I pretended to recognise him? Just so. For a purpose. I wanted to make him think that I suspected nothing."

"Then you think--?"

"Remember what I said to you yesterday."

"But Skinner--the butler--recognised him?"

"Exactly. It goes to prove that what I said about Skinner was correct. They are working together. The thing is self-evident. Look at it from your point of view. How simple it is. This man pretends to an intimate acquaintance with Skinner. You take that as evidence of Skinner's honesty. Skinner recognises this man. You take that as proof that this man is really your nephew. The fact that Skinner recognised as Jimmy Crocker a man who is not Jimmy Crocker condemns him."

"But why did you--?"

"I told you that I pretended to accept this man as the real Jimmy Crocker for a purpose. At present there is nothing that you can do. Mere impersonation is not a crime. If I had exposed him when

we met, you would have gained nothing beyond driving him from the house. Whereas, if we wait, if we pretend to suspect nothing, we shall undoubtedly catch him red-handed in an attempt on your nephew's invention."

"You are sure that that is why he has come?"

"What other reason could he have?"

"I thought he might be trying to kidnap Ogden."

Lord Wisbeach frowned thoughtfully. He had not taken this consideration into account.

"It is possible," he said. "There have been several attempts made, have there not, to kidnap your son?"

"At one time," said Mrs. Pett proudly, "there was not a child in America who had to be more closely guarded. Why, the kidnapers had a special nick-name for Oggie. They called him the Little Nugget."

"Of course, then, it is quite possible that that may be the man's object. In any case, our course must be the same. We must watch every move he makes." He paused. "I could help--pardon my suggesting it--I could help a great deal more if you were to

invite me to live in the house. You were kind enough to ask me to visit you in the country, but it will be two weeks before you go to the Country, and in those two weeks--"

"You must come here at once, Lord Wisbeach. To-night. To-day."

"I think that would be the best plan."

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am for all you are doing."

"You have been so kind to me, Mrs. Pett," said Lord Wisbeach with feeling, "that it is surely only right that I should try to make some return. Let us leave it at this then. I will come here to-night and will make it my business to watch these two men. I will go and pack my things and have them sent here."

"It is wonderful of you, Lord Wisbeach."

"Not at all," replied his lordship. "It will be a pleasure."

He held out his hand, drawing it back rapidly as the dog Aida made a snap at it. Substituting a long-range leave-taking for the more intimate farewell, he left the room.

When he had gone, Mrs. Pett remained for some minutes, thinking. She was aflame with excitement. She had a sensational mind, and

it had absorbed Lord Wisbeach's revelations eagerly. Her admiration for his lordship was intense, and she trusted him utterly. The only doubt that occurred to her was whether, with the best intentions in the world, he would be able unassisted to foil a pair of schemers so distant from each other geographically as the man who called himself Jimmy Crocker and the man who had called himself Skinner. That was a point on which they had not touched, the fact that one impostor was above stairs, the other below. It seemed to Mrs. Pett impossible that Lord Wisbeach, for all his zeal, could watch Skinner without neglecting Jimmy or foil Jimmy without taking his attention off Skinner. It was manifestly a situation that called for allies. She felt that she must have further assistance.

To Mrs. Pett, doubtless owing to her hobby of writing sensational fiction, there was a magic in the word detective which was shared by no other word in the language. She loved detectives--their keen eyes, their quiet smiles, their Derby hats. When they came on the stage, she leaned forward in her orchestra chair; when they entered her own stories, she always wrote with a greater zest. It is not too much to say that she had an almost spiritual attachment for detectives, and the idea of neglecting to employ one in real life, now that circumstances had combined to render his advent so necessary, struck her as both rash and inartistic. In the old days, when Ogden had been kidnapped, the only thing which had brought her balm had been the daily interviews with the

detectives. She ached to telephone for one now.

The only consideration that kept her back was a regard for Lord Wisbeach's feelings. He had been so kind and so shrewd that to suggest reinforcing him with outside assistance must infallibly wound him deeply. And yet the situation demanded the services of a trained specialist. Lord Wisbeach had borne himself during their recent conversation in such a manner as to leave no doubt that he considered himself adequate to deal with the matter single-handed: but admirable though he was he was not a professional exponent of the art of espionage. He needed to be helped in spite of himself.

A happy solution struck Mrs. Pett. There was no need to tell him. She could combine the installation of a detective with the nicest respect for her ally's feelings by the simple process of engaging one without telling Lord Wisbeach anything about it.

The telephone stood at her elbow, concealed--at the express request of the interior decorator who had designed the room--in the interior of what looked to the casual eye like a stuffed owl. On a table near at hand, handsomely bound in morocco to resemble a complete works of Shakespeare, was the telephone book. Mrs. Pett hesitated no longer. She had forgotten the address of the detective agency which she had employed on the occasion of the kidnapping of Ogden, but she remembered the name, and also the

name of the delightfully sympathetic manager or proprietor or whatever he was who had listened to her troubles then.

She unhooked the receiver, and gave a number.

"I want to speak to Mr. Sturgis," she said.

"Oh, Mr. Sturgis," said Mrs. Pett. "I wonder if you could possibly run up here--yes, now. This is Mrs. Peter Pett speaking. You remember we met some years ago when I was Mrs. Ford. Yes, the mother of Ogden Ford. I want to consult--You will come up at once? Thank you so much. Good-bye."

Mrs. Pett hung up the receiver.