

CHAPTER XVII

MISS TRIMBLE, DETECTIVE

Downstairs, in the dining-room, Jimmy was smoking cigarettes and reviewing in his mind the peculiarities of the situation, when Ann came in.

"Oh, there you are," said Ann. "I thought you must have gone upstairs."

"I have been having a delightful and entertaining conversation with my old chum, Lord Wisbeach."

"Good gracious! What about?"

"Oh, this and that."

"Not about old times?"

"No, we did not touch upon old times."

"Does he still believe that you are Jimmy Crocker? I'm so nervous," said Ann, "that I can hardly speak."

"I shouldn't be nervous," said Jimmy encouragingly. "I don't see

how things could be going better."

"That's what makes me nervous. Our luck is too good to last. We are taking such risks. It would have been bad enough without Skinner and Lord Wisbeach. At any moment you may make some fatal slip. Thank goodness, aunt Nesta's suspicions have been squashed for the time being now that Skinner and Lord Wisbeach have accepted you as genuine. But then you have only seen them for a few minutes. When they have been with you a little longer, they may get suspicious themselves. I can't imagine how you managed to keep it up with Lord Wisbeach. I should have thought he would be certain to say something about the time when you were supposed to be friends in London. We simply mustn't strain our luck. I want you to go straight to aunt Nesta now and ask her to let Jerry come back."

"You still refuse to let me take Jerry's place?"

"Of course I do. You'll find aunt Nesta upstairs."

"Very well. But suppose I can't persuade her to forgive Jerry?"

"I think she is certain to do anything you ask. You saw how friendly she was to you at lunch. I don't see how anything can have happened since lunch to change her."

"Very well. I'll go to her now."

"And when you have seen her, go to the library and wait for me. It's the second room along the passage outside here. I have promised to drive Lord Wisbeach down to his hotel in my car. I met him outside just now and he tells me aunt Nesta has invited him to stay here, so he wants to go and get his things ready. I shan't be twenty minutes. I shall come straight back."

Jimmy found himself vaguely disquieted by this piece of information.

"Lord Wisbeach is coming to stay here?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Well, I'll go and see Mrs. Pett."

No traces of the disturbance which had temporarily ruffled the peace of the drawing-room were to be observed when Jimmy reached it. The receiver of the telephone was back on its hook, Mrs. Pett back in her chair, the dog Aida back in her basket. Mrs. Pett, her mind at ease now that she had taken the step of summoning Mr. Sturgis, was reading a book, one of her own, and was absorbed in it. The dog Aida slumbered noisily.

The sight of Jimmy, however, roused Mrs. Pett from her literary calm. To her eye, after what Lord Wisbeach had revealed there was something sinister in the very way in which he walked into the room. He made her flesh creep. In "A Society Thug" (Mobbs and Stifien, \$1.35 net, all rights of translation reserved, including the Scandinavian) she had portrayed just such a man--smooth, specious, and formidable. Instinctively, as she watched Jimmy, her mind went back to the perfectly rotten behaviour of her own Marsden Tuke (it was only in the last chapter but one that they managed to foil his outrageous machinations), and it seemed to her that here was Tuke in the flesh. She had pictured him, she remembered, as a man of agreeable exterior, the better calculated to deceive and undo the virtuous; and the fact that Jimmy was a presentable-looking young man only made him appear viler in her eyes. In a word, she could hardly have been in less suitable frame of mind to receive graciously any kind of a request from him. She would have suspected ulterior motives if he had asked her the time.

Jimmy did not know this. He thought that she eyed him a trifle frostily, but he did not attribute this to any suspicion of him. He tried to ingratiate himself by smiling pleasantly. He could not have made a worse move. Marsden Tuke's pleasant smile had been his deadliest weapon. Under its influence deluded people had trusted him alone with their jewellery and what not.

"Aunt Nesta," said Jimmy, "I wonder if I might ask you a personal favour."

Mrs. Pett shuddered at the glibness with which he brought out the familiar name. This was superTuke. Marsden himself, scoundrel as he was, could not have called her "Aunt Nesta" as smoothly as that.

"Yes?" she said at last. She found it difficult to speak.

"I happened to meet an old friend of mine this morning. He was very sorry for himself. It appears that--for excellent reasons, of course--you had dismissed him. I mean Jerry Mitchell."

Mrs. Pett was now absolutely appalled. The conspiracy seemed to grow more complicated every moment. Already its ramifications embraced this man before her, a trusted butler, and her husband's late physical instructor. Who could say where it would end? She had never liked Jerry Mitchell, but she had never suspected him of being a conspirator. Yet, if this man who called himself Jimmy Crocker was an old friend of his, how could he be anything else?

"Mitchell," Jimmy went on, unconscious of the emotions which his every word was arousing in his hearer's bosom, "told me about what happened yesterday. He is very depressed. He said he could not think how he happened to behave in such an abominable way. He

entreated me to put in a word for him with you. He begged me to tell you how he regretted the brutal assault, and asked me to mention the fact that his record had hitherto been blameless."

Jimmy paused. He was getting no encouragement, and seemed to be making no impression whatever. Mrs. Pett was sitting bolt upright in her chair in a stiffly defensive sort of way. She had the appearance of being absolutely untouched by his eloquence. "In fact," he concluded lamely, "he is very sorry."

There was silence for a moment.

"How do you come to know Mitchell?" asked Mrs. Pett.

"We knew each other when I was over here working on the Chronicle. I saw him fight once or twice. He is an excellent fellow, and used to have a right swing that was a pippin--I should say extremely excellent. Brought it up from the floor, you know."

"I strongly object to prize-fighters," said Mrs. Pett, "and I was opposed to Mitchell coming into the house from the first."

"You wouldn't let him come back, I suppose?" queried Jimmy tentatively.

"I would not. I would not dream of such a thing."

"He's full of remorse, you know."

"If he has a spark of humanity, I have no doubt of it."

Jimmy paused. This thing was not coming out as well as it might have done. He feared that for once in her life Ann was about to be denied something on which she had set her heart. The reflection that this would be extremely good for her competed for precedence in his mind with the reflection that she would probably blame him for the failure, which would be unpleasant.

"He is very fond of Ogden really."

"H'm," said Mrs. Pett.

"I think the heat must have made him irritable. In his normal state he would not strike a lamb. I've known him to do it."

"Do what?"

"Not strike lambs."

"Isch," said Mrs. Pett--the first time Jimmy had ever heard that remarkable monosyllable proceed from human lips. He took it--rightly--to be intended to convey disapproval, scepticism,

and annoyance. He was convinced that this mission was going to be one of his failures.

"Then I may tell him," he said, "that it's all right?"

"That what is all right?"

"That he may come back here?"

"Certainly not."

Mrs. Pett was not a timid woman, but she could not restrain a shudder as she watched the plot unfold before her eyes. Her gratitude towards Lord Wisbeach at this point in the proceedings almost became hero-worship. If it had not been for him and his revelations concerning this man before her, she would certainly have yielded to the request that Jerry Mitchell be allowed to return to the house. Much as she disliked Jerry, she had been feeling so triumphant at the thought of Jimmy Crocker coming to her in spite of his step-mother's wishes and so pleased at having unexpectedly got her own way that she could have denied him nothing that he might have cared to ask. But now it was as if, herself unseen, she were looking on at a gang of conspirators hatching some plot. She was in the strong strategic position of the person who is apparently deceived, but who in reality knows all.

For a moment she considered the question of admitting Jerry to the house. Evidently his presence was necessary to the consummation of the plot, whatever it might be, and it occurred to her that it might be as well, on the principle of giving the schemers enough rope to hang themselves with, to let him come back and play his part. Then she reflected that, with the self-styled Jimmy Crocker as well as the fraudulent Skinner in the house, Lord Wisbeach and the detective would have their hands quite full enough. It would be foolish to complicate matters. She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Mr. Sturgis would be arriving soon, if he had really started at once from his office, as he had promised. She drew comfort from the imminence of his coming. It would be pleasant to put herself in the hands of an expert.

Jimmy had paused, mid-way to the door, and was standing there as if reluctant to accept her answer to his plea.

"It would never occur again. What happened yesterday, I mean. You need not be afraid of that."

"I am not afraid of that," responded Mrs. Pett tartly.

"If you had seen him when I did--"

"When did you? You landed from the boat this morning, you went to Mr. Pett's office, and then came straight up here with him. I am interested to know when you did see Mitchell?"

She regretted this thrust a little, for she felt it might put the man on his guard by showing that she suspected something but she could not resist it, and it pleased her to see that her companion was momentarily confused.

"I met him when I was going for my luggage," said Jimmy.

It was just the way Marsden Tuke would have got out of it. Tuke was always wriggling out of corners like that. Mrs. Pett's horror of Jimmy grew.

"I told him, of course," said Jimmy, "that you had very kindly invited me to stay with you, and he told me all, about his trouble and implored me to plead for him. If you had seen him when I did, all gloom and repentance, you would have been sorry for him. Your woman's heart--"

Whatever Jimmy was about to say regarding Mrs. Pett's woman's heart was interrupted by the opening of the door and the deep, respectful voice of Mr. Crocker.

"Mr. Sturgis."

The detective entered briskly, as if time were money with him--as indeed it was, for the International Detective Agency, of which he was the proprietor, did a thriving business. He was a gaunt, hungry-looking man of about fifty, with sunken eyes and thin lips. It was his habit to dress in the height of fashion, for one of his favourite axioms was that a man might be a detective and still look a gentleman, and his appearance was that of the individual usually described as a "popular clubman." That is to say, he looked like a floorwalker taking a Sunday stroll. His prosperous exterior deceived Jimmy satisfactorily, and the latter left the room little thinking that the visitor was anything but an ordinary caller.

The detective glanced keenly at him as he passed. He made a practice of glancing keenly at nearly everything. It cost nothing and impressed clients.

"I am so glad you have come, Mr. Sturgis," said Mrs. Pett. "Won't you sit down?"

Mr. Sturgis sat down, pulled up the knees of his trousers that half-inch which keeps them from bagging and so preserves the gentlemanliness of the appearance, and glanced keenly at Mrs. Pett.

"Who was that young man who just went out?"

"It is about him that I wished to consult you, Mr. Sturgis."

Mr. Sturgis leaned back, and placed the tips of his fingers together.

"Tell me how he comes to be here."

"He pretends that he is my nephew, James Crocker."

"Your nephew? Have you never seen your nephew?"

"Never. I ought to tell you, that a few years ago my sister married for the second time. I disapproved of the marriage, and refused to see her husband or his son--he was a widower. A few weeks ago, for private reasons, I went over to England, where they are living, and asked my sister to let the boy come here to work in my husband's office. She refused, and my husband and I returned to New York. This morning I was astonished to get a telephone call from Mr. Pett from his office, to say that James Crocker had unexpectedly arrived after all, and was then at the office. They came up here, and the young man seemed quite genuine. Indeed, he had an offensive jocularly which would be quite in keeping with the character of the real James Crocker, from what I have heard of him."

Mr. Sturgis nodded.

"Know what you mean. Saw that thing in the paper," he said briefly. "Yes?"

"Now, it is very curious, but almost from the start I was uneasy. When I say that the young man seemed genuine, I mean that he completely deceived my husband and my niece, who lives with us. But I had reasons, which I need not go into now, for being on my guard, and I was suspicious. What aroused my suspicion was the fact that my husband thought that he remembered this young man as a fellow-traveller of ours on the Atlantic, on our return voyage, while he claimed to have landed that morning on the Caronia."

"You are certain of that, Mrs. Pett? He stated positively that he had landed this morning?"

"Yes. Quite positively. Unfortunately I myself had no chance of judging the truth of what he said, as I am such a bad sailor that I was seldom out of my stateroom from beginning to end of the voyage. However, as I say, I was suspicious. I did not see how I could confirm my suspicions, until I remembered that my new butler, Skinner, had come straight from my sister's house."

"That is the man who just admitted me?"

"Exactly. He entered my employment only a few days ago, having come direct from London. I decided to wait until Skinner should meet this young man. Of course, when he first came into the house, he was with my husband, who opened the door with his key, so that they did not meet then."

"I understand," said Mr. Sturgis, glancing keenly at the dog Aida, who had risen and was sniffing at his ankles. "You thought that if Skinner recognised this young man, it would be proof of his identity?"

"Exactly."

"Did he recognise him?"

"Yes. But wait. I have not finished. He recognised him, and for the moment I was satisfied. But I had had my suspicions of Skinner, too. I ought to tell you that I had been warned against him by a great friend of mine, Lord Wisbeach, an English peer whom we have known intimately for a very long time. He is one of the Shropshire Wisbeaches, you know."

"No doubt," said Mr. Sturgis.

"Lord Wisbeach used to be intimate with the real Jimmy Crocker.

He came to lunch to-day and met this impostor. He pretended to recognise him, in order to put him off his guard, but after lunch he came to me here and told me that in reality he had never seen him before in his life, and that, whoever else he might be, he was certainly not James Crocker, my nephew."

She broke off and looked at Mr. Sturgis expectantly. The detective smiled a quiet smile.

"And even that is not all. There is another thing. Mr. Pett used to employ as a physical instructor a man named Jerry Mitchell. Yesterday I dismissed him for reasons it is not necessary to go into. To-day--just as you arrived in fact--the man who calls himself Jimmy Crocker was begging me to allow Mitchell to return to the house and resume his work here. Does that not strike you as suspicious, Mr. Sturgis?"

The detective closed his eyes, and smiled his quiet smile again. He opened his eyes, and fixed them on Mrs. Pett.

"As pretty a case as I have come across in years," he said. "Mrs. Pett, let me tell you something. It is one of my peculiarities that I never forget a face. You say that this young man pretends to have landed this morning from the Caronia? Well, I saw him myself more than a week ago in a Broadway cafe."

"You did?"

"Talking to--Jerry Mitchell. I know Mitchell well by sight."

Mrs. Pett uttered an exclamation.

"And this butler of yours--Skinner. Shall I tell you something about him? You perhaps know that when the big detective agencies, Anderson's and the others, are approached in the matter of tracing a man who is wanted for anything they sometimes ask the smaller agencies like my own to work in with them. It saves time and widens the field of operations. We are very glad to do Anderson's service, and Anderson's are big enough to be able to afford to let us do it. Now, a few days ago, a friend of mine in Anderson's came to me with a sheaf of photographs, which had been sent to them from London. Whether some private client in London or from Scotland Yard I do not know. Nor do I know why the original of the photograph was wanted. But Anderson's had been asked to trace him and make a report. My peculiar gift for remembering faces has enabled me to oblige the Anderson people once or twice before in this way. I studied the photographs very carefully, and kept two of them for reference. I have one with me now." He felt in his pockets. "Do you recognise it?"

Mrs. Pett stared at the photograph. It was the presentment of a stout, good-humoured man of middle-age, whose solemn gaze dwelt

on the middle distance in that fixed way which a man achieves only in photographs.

"Skinner!"

"Exactly," said Mr. Sturgis, taking the photograph from her and putting it back in his pocket. "I recognised him directly he opened the door to me."

"But--but I am almost certain that Skinner is the man who let me in when I called on my sister in London."

"Almost," repeated the detective. "Did you observe him very closely?"

"No. I suppose I did not."

"The type is a very common one. It would be very easy indeed for a clever crook to make himself up as your sister's butler closely enough to deceive any one who had only seen the original once and for a short time then. What their game is I could not say at present, but, taking everything into consideration, there can be no doubt whatever that the man who calls himself your nephew and the man who calls himself your sister's butler are working together, and that Jerry Mitchell is working in with them. As I say, I cannot tell you what they are after at present, but there

is no doubt that your unexpected dismissal of Mitchell must have upset their plans. That would account for the eagerness to get him back into the house again."

"Lord Wisbeach thought that they were trying to steal my nephew's explosive. Perhaps you have read in the papers that my nephew, Willie Partridge, has completed an explosive which is more powerful than any at present known. His father--you have heard of him, of course--Dwight Partridge."

Mr. Sturgis nodded.

"His father was working on it at the time of his death, and Willie has gone on with his experiments where he left off. To-day at lunch he showed us a test-tube full of the explosive. He put it in my husband's safe in the library. Lord Wisbeach is convinced that these scoundrels are trying to steal this, but I cannot help feeling that this is another of those attempts to kidnap my son Ogden. What do you think?"

"It is impossible to say at this stage of the proceedings. All we can tell is that there is some plot going on. You refused, of course, to allow Mitchell to come back to the house?"

"Yes. You think that was wise?"

"Undoubtedly. If his absence did not handicap them, they would not be so anxious to have him on the spot."

"What shall we do?"

"You wish me to undertake the case?"

"Of course."

Mr. Sturgis frowned thoughtfully.

"It would be useless for me to come here myself. By bad luck the man who pretends to be your nephew has seen me. If I were to come to stay here, he would suspect something. He would be on his guard." He pondered with closed eyes. "Miss Trimble," he exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon."

"You want Miss Trimble. She is the smartest worker in my office. This is precisely the type of case she could handle to perfection."

"A woman?" said Mrs. Pett doubtfully.

"A woman in a thousand," said Mr. Sturgis. "A woman in a

million."

"But physically would a woman be--?"

"Miss Trimble knows more about jiu-jitsu than the Japanese professor who taught her. At one time she was a Strong Woman in small-time vaudeville. She is an expert revolver-shot. I am not worrying about Miss Trimble's capacity to do the work. I am only wondering in what capacity it would be best for her to enter the house. Have you a vacancy for a parlour-maid?"

"I could make one."

"Do so at once. Miss Trimble is at her best as a parlour-maid. She handled the Marling divorce case in that capacity. Have you a telephone in the room?"

Mrs. Pett opened the stuffed owl. The detective got in touch with his office.

"Mr. Sturgis speaking. Tell Miss Trimble to come to the phone. . . . Miss Trimble? I am speaking from Mrs. Pett's on Riverside Drive. You know the house? I want you to come up at once. Take a taxi. Go to the back-door and ask to see Mrs. Pett. Say you have come about getting a place here as a maid. Understand? Right. Say, listen, Miss Trimble. Hello? Yes, don't hang up for a

moment. Do you remember those photographs I showed you yesterday? Yes, the photographs from Anderson's. I've found the man. He's the butler here. Take a look at him when you get to the house. Now go and get a taxi. Mrs. Pett will explain everything when you arrive." He hung up the receiver. "I think I had better go now, Mrs. Pett. It would not do for me to be here while these fellows are on their guard. I can safely leave the matter to Miss Trimble. I wish you good afternoon."

After he had gone, Mrs. Pett vainly endeavoured to interest herself again in her book, but in competition with the sensations of life, fiction, even though she had written it herself, had lost its power and grip. It seemed to her that Miss Trimble must be walking to the house instead of journeying thither in a taxi-cab. But a glance at the clock assured her that only five minutes had elapsed since the detective's departure. She went to the window and looked out. She was hopelessly restless.

At last a taxi-cab stopped at the corner, and a young woman got out and walked towards the house. If this were Miss Trimble, she certainly looked capable. She was a stumpy, square-shouldered person, and even at that distance it was possible to perceive that she had a face of no common shrewdness and determination. The next moment she had turned down the side-street in the direction of the back-premises of Mrs. Pett's house: and a few minutes later Mr. Crocker presented himself.

"A young person wishes to see you, madam. A young person of the name of Trimble." A pang passed through Mrs. Pett as she listened to his measured tones. It was tragic that so perfect a butler should be a scoundrel. "She says that you desired her to call in connection with a situation."

"Show her up here, Skinner. She is the new parlour-maid. I will send her down to you when I have finished speaking to her."

"Very good, madam."

There seemed to Mrs. Pett to be a faint touch of defiance in Miss Trimble's manner as she entered the room. The fact was that Miss Trimble held strong views on the equal distribution of property, and rich people's houses always affected her adversely. Mr. Crocker retired, closing the door gently behind him.

A meaning sniff proceeded from Mrs. Pett's visitor as she looked round at the achievements of the interior decorator, who had lavished his art unsparingly in this particular room. At this close range she more than fulfilled the promise of that distant view which Mrs. Pett had had of her from the window. Her face was not only shrewd and determined: it was menacing. She had thick eyebrows, from beneath which small, glittering eyes looked out like dangerous beasts in undergrowth: and the impressive effect

of these was accentuated by the fact that, while the left eye looked straight out at its object, the right eye had a sort of roving commission and was now, while its colleague fixed Mrs. Pett with a gimlet stare, examining the ceiling. As to the rest of the appearance of this remarkable woman, her nose was stubby and aggressive, and her mouth had the coldly forbidding look of the closed door of a subway express when you have just missed the train. It bade you keep your distance on pain of injury. Mrs. Pett, though herself a strong woman, was conscious of a curious weakness as she looked at a female of the species so much deadlier than any male whom she had ever encountered: and came near feeling a half-pity for the unhappy wretches on whom this dynamic maiden was to be unleashed. She hardly knew how to open the conversation.

Miss Trimble, however, was equal to the occasion. She always preferred to open conversations herself. Her lips parted, and words flew out as if shot from a machine-gun. As far as Mrs. Pett could observe, she considered it unnecessary to part her teeth, preferring to speak with them clenched. This gave an additional touch of menace to her speech.

"Dafternoon," said Miss Trimble, and Mrs. Pett backed convulsively into the padded recesses of her chair, feeling as if somebody had thrown a brick at her.

"Good afternoon," she said faintly.

"Gladda meeher, siz Pett. Mr. Sturge semme up. Said y'ad job fr me. Came here squick scould."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Squick scould. Got slow taxi."

"Oh, yes."

Miss Trimble's right eye flashed about the room like a searchlight, but she kept the other hypnotically on her companion's face.

"Whass trouble?" The right eye rested for a moment on a magnificent Corot over the mantelpiece, and she snifted again.

"Not s'prised y'have trouble. All rich people 've trouble. Noth' t'do with their time 'cept get 'nto trouble."

She frowned disapprovingly at a Canaletto.

"You--ah--appear to dislike the rich," said Mrs. Pett, as nearly in her grand manner as she could contrive.

Miss Trimble bowed over the grand manner as if it had been a

small fowl and she an automobile. She rolled over it and squashed it flat.

"Hate 'em! Sogelist!"

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Pett humbly. This woman was beginning to oppress her to an almost unbelievable extent.

"Sogelist! No use fr idle rich. Ev' read B'nard Shaw? Huh? Or Upton Sinclair? Uh? Read'm. Make y'think a bit. Well, y'haven't told me whasser trouble."

Mrs. Pett was by this time heartily regretting the impulse which had caused her to telephone to Mr. Sturgis. In a career which had had more than its share of detectives, both real and fictitious, she had never been confronted with a detective like this. The galling thing was that she was helpless. After all, one engaged a detective for his or her shrewdness and efficiency, not for suavity and polish. A detective who hurls speech at you through clenched teeth and yet detects is better value for the money than one who, though an ideal companion for the drawing-room, is incompetent: and Mrs. Pett, like most other people, subconsciously held the view that the ruder a person is the more efficient he must be. It is but rarely that any one is found who is not dazzled by the glamour of incivility. She crushed down her resentment at her visitor's tone, and tried to concentrate her

mind on the fact that this was a business matter and that what she wanted was results rather than fair words. She found it easier to do this when looking at the other's face. It was a capable face. Not beautiful, perhaps, but full of promise of action. Miss Trimble having ceased temporarily to speak, her mouth was in repose, and when her mouth was in repose it looked more efficient than anything else of its size in existence.

"I want you," said Mrs. Pett, "to come here and watch some men--"

"Men! Thought so! Wh' there's trouble, always men't bottom'f it!"

"You do not like men?"

"Hate 'em! Suff-gist!" She looked penetratingly at Mrs. Pett. Her left eye seemed to pounce out from under its tangled brow.

"You S'porter of th' Cause?"

Mrs. Pett was an anti-Suffragist, but, though she held strong opinions, nothing would have induced her to air them at that moment. Her whole being quailed at the prospect of arguing with this woman. She returned hurriedly to the main theme.

"A young man arrived here this morning, pretending to be my nephew, James Crocker. He is an impostor. I want you to watch him very carefully."

"Whassiz game?"

"I do not know. Personally I think he is here to kidnap my son Ogden."

"I'll fix'm," said the fair Trimble confidently. "Say, that butler 'f yours. He's a crook!"

Mrs. Pett opened her eyes. This woman was manifestly competent at her work.

"Have you found that out already?"

"D'rectly saw him." Miss Trimble opened her purse. "Go' one 'f his photographs here. Brought it from office. He's th' man that's wanted 'll right."

"Mr. Sturgis and I both think he is working with the other man, the one who pretends to be my nephew."

"Sure. I'll fix 'm."

She returned the photograph to her purse and snapped the catch with vicious emphasis.

"There is another possibility," said Mrs. Pett. "My nephew, Mr. William Partridge, had invented a wonderful explosive, and it is quite likely that these men are here to try to steal it."

"Sure. Men'll do anything. If y' put all the men in th' world in th' cooler, wouldn't be 'ny more crime."

She glowered at the dog Aida, who had risen from the basket and removing the last remains of sleep from her system by a series of calisthenics of her own invention, as if she suspected her of masculinity. Mrs. Pett could not help wondering what tragedy in the dim past had caused this hatred of males on the part of her visitor. Miss Trimble had not the appearance of one who would lightly be deceived by Man; still less the appearance of one whom Man, unless short-sighted and extraordinarily susceptible, would go out of his way to deceive. She was still turning this mystery over in her mind, when her visitor spoke.

"Well, gimme th' rest of th' dope," said Miss Trimble.

"I beg your pardon?"

"More facts. Spill 'm!"

"Oh, I understand," said Mrs. Pett hastily, and embarked on a brief narrative of the suspicious circumstances which had caused

her to desire skilled assistance.

"Lor' W'sbeach?" said Miss Trimble, breaking the story. "Who's he?"

"A very great friend of ours."

"You vouch fr him pers'n'lly? He's all right, uh? Not a crook, huh?"

"Of course he is not!" said Mrs. Pett indignantly. "He's a great friend of mine."

"All right. Well, I guess thass 'bout all, huh? I'll be going downstairs 'an starting in."

"You can come here immediately?"

"Sure. Got parlour-maid rig round at m' boarding-house round corner. Come back with it 'n ten minutes. Same dress I used when I w's working on th' Marling D'vorce case. D'jer know th' Marlings? Idle rich! Bound t' get 'nto trouble. I fixed 'm. Well, g'bye. Mus' be going. No time t' waste."

Mrs. Pett leaned back faintly in her chair. She felt overcome.

Downstairs, on her way out, Miss Trimble had paused in the hall to inspect a fine statue which stood at the foot of the stairs. It was a noble work of art, but it seemed to displease her. She snorted.

"Idle rich!" she muttered scornfully. "Brrh!"

The portly form of Mr. Crocker loomed up from the direction of the back stairs. She fixed her left eye on him piercingly. Mr. Crocker met it, and quailed. He had that consciousness of guilt which philosophers tell is the worst drawback to crime. Why this woman's gaze should disturb him so thoroughly, he could not have said. She was a perfect stranger to him. She could know nothing about him. Yet he quailed.

"Say," said Miss Trimble. "I'm c'ming here 's parlour-maid."

"Oh, ah?" said Mr. Crocker, feebly.

"Grrrh!" observed Miss Trimble, and departed.