

## CHAPTER XIX

### BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

"Well, Skinner, my man," said Jimmy, "how goes it?"

Mr. Crocker looked about him cautiously. Then his priestly manner fell from him like a robe, and he bounded forward.

"Jimmy!" he exclaimed, seizing his son's hand and shaking it violently. "Say, it's great seeing you again, Jim!"

Jimmy drew himself up haughtily.

"Skinner, my good menial, you forget yourself strangely! You will be getting fired if you mitt the handsome guest in this chummy fashion!" He slapped his father on the back. "Dad, this is great! How on earth do you come to be here? What's the idea? Why the buttlng? When did you come over? Tell me all!"

Mr. Crocker hoisted himself nimbly onto the writing-desk, and sat there, beaming, with dangling legs.

"It was your letter that did it, Jimmy. Say, Jim, there wasn't any need for you to do a thing like that just for me."

"Well, I thought you would have a better chance of being a peer without me around. By the way, dad, how did my step-mother take the Lord Percy episode?"

A shadow fell upon Mr. Crocker's happy face.

"I don't like to do much thinking about your step-mother," he said. "She was pretty sore about Percy. And she was pretty sore about your lighting out for America. But, gee! what she must be feeling like now that I've come over, I daren't let myself think."

"You haven't explained that yet. Why did you come over?"

"Well, I'd been feeling homesick--I always do over there in the baseball season--and then talking with Pett made it worse--"

"Talking with Pett? Did you see him, then, when he was in London?"

"See him? I let him in!"

"How?"

"Into the house, I mean. I had just gone to the front door to see what sort of a day it was--I wanted to know if there had been

enough rain in the night to stop my having to watch that cricket game--and just as I got there the bell rang. I opened the door."

"A revoltingly plebeian thing to do! I'm ashamed of you, dad! They won't stand for that sort of thing in the House of Lords!"

"Well, before I knew what was happening they had taken me for the butler. I didn't want your step-mother to know I'd been opening doors--you remember how touchy she was always about it so I just let it go at that and jollied them along. But I just couldn't help asking the old man how the pennant race was making out, and that tickled him so much that he offered me a job here as butler if I ever wanted to make a change. And then your note came saying that you were going to New York, and--well, I couldn't help myself. You couldn't have kept me in London with ropes. I sneaked out next day and bought a passage on the Carmantic--she sailed the Wednesday after you left--and came straight here. They gave me this job right away." Mr. Crocker paused, and a holy light of enthusiasm made his homely features almost beautiful. "Say, Jim, I've seen a ball-game every darned day since I landed! Say, two days running Larry Doyle made home-runs! But, gosh! that guy Klem is one swell robber! See here!" Mr. Crocker sprang down from the desk, and snatched up a handful of books, which he proceeded to distribute about the floor. "There were two men on bases in the sixth and What's-his-name came to bat. He lined one out to centre-field--where this book is--and--"

"Pull yourself together, Skinner! You can't monkey about with the employer's library like that." Jimmy restored the books to their places. "Simmer down and tell me more. Postpone the gossip from the diamond. What plans have you made? Have you considered the future at all? You aren't going to hold down this buttlng job forever, are you? When do you go back to London?"

The light died out of Mr. Crocker's face.

"I guess I shall have to go back some time. But how can I yet, with the Giants leading the league like this?"

"But did you just light out without saying anything?"

"I left a note for your step-mother telling her I had gone to America for a vacation. Jimmy, I hate to think what she's going to do to me when she gets me back!"

"Assert yourself, dad! Tell her that woman's place is the home and man's the ball-park! Be firm!"

Mr. Crocker shook his head dubiously.

"It's all very well to talk that way when you're three thousand miles from home, but you know as well as I do, Jim, that your

step-mother, though she's a delightful woman, isn't the sort you can assert yourself with. Look at this sister of hers here. I guess you haven't been in the house long enough to have noticed, but she's very like Eugenia in some ways. She's the boss all right, and old Pett does just what he's told to. I guess it's the same with me, Jim. There's a certain type of man that's just born to have it put over on him by a certain type of woman. I'm that sort of man and your stepmother's that sort of woman. No, I guess I'm going to get mine all right, and the only thing to do is to keep it from stopping me having a good time now."

There was truth in what he said, and Jimmy recognised it. He changed the subject.

"Well, never mind that. There's no sense in worrying oneself about the future. Tell me, dad, where did you get all the 'dinner-is-served, madam' stuff? How did you ever learn to be a butler?"

"Bayliss taught me back in London. And, of course, I've played butlers when I was on the stage."

Jimmy did not speak for a moment.

"Did you ever play a kidnapper, dad?" he asked at length.

"Sure. I was Chicago Ed. in a crook play called 'This Way Out.'  
Why, surely you saw me in that? I got some good notices."

Jimmy nodded.

"Of course. I knew I'd seen you play that sort of part some time.  
You came on during the dark scene and--"

--switched on the lights and--"

--covered the bunch with your gun while they were still  
blinking! You were great in that part, dad."

"It was a good part," said Mr. Crocker modestly. "It had fat. I'd  
like to have a chance to play a kidnapper again. There's a lot of  
pep to kidnappers."

"You shall play one again," said Jimmy. "I am putting on a little  
sketch with a kidnapper as the star part."

"Eh? A sketch? You, Jim? Where?"

"Here. In this house. It is entitled 'Kidnapping Ogden' and opens  
to-night."

Mr. Crocker looked at his only son in concern. Jimmy appeared to

him to be rambling.

"Amateur theatricals?" he hazarded.

"In the sense that there is no pay for performing, yes. Dad, you know that kid Ogden upstairs? Well, it's quite simple. I want you to kidnap him for me."

Mr. Crocker sat down heavily. He shook his head.

"I don't follow all this."

"Of course not. I haven't begun to explain. Dad, in your rambles through this joint you've noticed a girl with glorious red-gold hair, I imagine?"

"Ann Chester?"

"Ann Chester. I'm going to marry her."

"Jimmy!"

"But she doesn't know it yet. Now, follow me carefully, dad. Five years ago Ann Chester wrote a book of poems. It's on that desk there. You were using it a moment back as second-base or something. Now, I was working at that time on the Chronicle. I

wrote a skit on those poems for the Sunday paper. Do you begin to follow the plot?"

"She's got it in for you? She's sore?"

"Exactly. Get that firmly fixed in your mind, because it's the source from which all the rest of the story springs."

Mr. Crocker interrupted.

"But I don't understand. You say she's sore at you. Well, how is it that you came in together looking as if you were good friends when I let you in this morning?"

"I was waiting for you to ask that. The explanation is that she doesn't know that I am Jimmy Crocker."

"But you came here saying that you were Jimmy Crocker."

"Quite right. And that is where the plot thickens. I made Ann's acquaintance first in London and then on the boat. I had found out that Jimmy Crocker was the man she hated most in the world, so I took another name. I called myself Bayliss."

"Bayliss!"



"I had to think of something quick, because the clerk at the shipping office was waiting to fill in my ticket. I had just been talking to Bayliss on the phone and his was the only name that came into my mind. You know how it is when you try to think of a name suddenly. Now mark the sequel. Old Bayliss came to see me off at Paddington. Ann was there and saw me. She said 'Good evening, Mr. Bayliss' or something, and naturally old Bayliss replied 'What ho!' or words to that effect. The only way to handle the situation was to introduce him as my father. I did so. Ann, therefore, thinks that I am a young man named Bayliss who has come over to America to make his fortune. We now come to the third reel. I met Ann by chance at the Knickerbocker and took her to lunch. While we were lunching, that confirmed congenital idiot, Reggie Bartling, who happened to have come over to America as well, came up and called me by my name. I knew that, if Ann discovered who I really was, she would have nothing more to do with me, so I gave Reggie the haughty stare and told him that he had made a mistake. He ambled away--and possibly committed suicide in his anguish at having made such a bloomer--leaving Ann discussing with me the extraordinary coincidence of my being Jimmy Crocker's double. Do you follow the story of my life so far?"

Mr. Crocker, who had been listening with wrinkled brow and other signs of rapt attention, nodded.

"I understand all that. But how did you come to get into this house?"

"That is reel four. I am getting to that. It seems that Ann, who is the sweetest girl on earth and always on the lookout to do some one a kindness, had decided, in the interests of the boy's future, to remove young Ogden Ford from his present sphere, where he is being spoiled and ruined, and send him down to a man on Long Island who would keep him for awhile and instil the first principles of decency into him. Her accomplice in this admirable scheme was Jerry Mitchell."

"Jerry Mitchell!"

"Who, as you know, got fired yesterday. Jerry was to have done the rough work of the job. But, being fired, he was no longer available. I, therefore, offered to take his place. So here I am."

"You're going to kidnap that boy?"

"No. You are."

"Me!"

"Precisely. You are going to play a benefit performance of your

world-famed success, Chicago Ed. Let me explain further. Owing to circumstances which I need not go into, Ogden has found out that I am really Jimmy Crocker, so he refuses to have anything more to do with me. I had deceived him into believing that I was a professional kidnapper, and he came to me and offered to let me kidnap him if I would go fifty-fifty with him in the ransom!"

"Gosh!"

"Yes, he's an intelligent child, full of that sort of bright ideas. Well, now he has found that I am not all his fancy painted me, he wouldn't come away with me; and I want you to understudy me while the going is good. In the fifth reel, which will be released to-night after the household has retired to rest, you will be featured. It's got to be tonight, because it has just occurred to me that Ogden, knowing that Lord Wisbeach is a crook, may go to him with the same proposal that he made to me."

"Lord Wisbeach a crook!"

"Of the worst description. He is here to steal that explosive stuff of Willie Partridge's. But as I have blocked that play, he may turn his attention to Ogden."

"But, Jimmy, if that fellow is a crook--how do you know he is?"

"He told me so himself."

"Well, then, why don't you expose him?"

"Because in order to do so, Skinner my man, I should have to explain that I was really Jimmy Crocker, and the time is not yet ripe for that. To my thinking, the time will not be ripe till you have got safely away with Ogden Ford. I can then go to Ann and say 'I may have played you a rotten trick in the past, but I have done you a good turn now, so let's forget the past!' So you see that everything now depends on you, dad. I'm not asking you to do anything difficult. I'll go round to the boarding-house now and tell Jerry Mitchell about what we have arranged, and have him waiting outside here in a car. Then all you will have to do is to go to Ogden, play a short scene as Chicago Ed., escort him to the car, and then go back to bed and have a good sleep. Once Ogden thinks you are a professional kidnapper, you won't have any difficulty at all. Get it into your head that he wants to be kidnapped. Surely you can tackle this light and attractive job? Why, it will be a treat for you to do a bit of character acting once more!"

Jimmy had struck the right note. His father's eyes began to gleam with excitement. The scent of the footlights seemed to dilate his nostrils.

"I was always good at that rough-neck stuff," he murmured meditatively. "I used to eat it!"

"Exactly," said Jimmy. "Look at it in the right way, and I am doing you a kindness in giving you this chance."

Mr. Crocker rubbed his cheek with his forefinger.

"You'd want me to make up for the part?" he asked wistfully.

"Of course!"

"You want me to do it to-night?"

"At about two in the morning, I thought."

"I'll do it, Jim!"

Jimmy grasped his hand.

"I knew I could rely on you, dad."

Mr. Crocker was following a train of thought.

"Dark wig . . . blue chin . . . heavy eyebrows . . . I guess I can't do better than my old Chicago Ed. make-up. Say, Jimmy, how

am I to get to the kid?"

"That'll be all right. You can stay in my room till the time comes to go to him. Use it as a dressing-room."

"How am I to get him out of the house?"

"Through this room. I'll tell Jerry to wait out on the side-street with the car from two o'clock on."

Mr. Crocker considered these arrangements.

"That seems to be about all," he said.

"I don't think there's anything else."

"I'll slip downtown and buy the props."

"I'll go and tell Jerry."

A thought struck Mr. Crocker.

"You'd better tell Jerry to make up, too. He doesn't want the kid recognising him and squealing on him later."

Jimmy was lost in admiration of his father's resource.

"You think of everything, dad! That wouldn't have occurred to me. You certainly do take to Crime in the most wonderful way. It seems to come naturally to you!"

Mr. Crocker smirked modestly.