

## CHAPTER XXI

### CHICAGO ED.

Riverside Drive slept. The moon shone on darkened windows and deserted sidewalks. It was past one o'clock in the morning. The wicked Forties were still ablaze with light and noisy foxtrots; but in the virtuous Hundreds, where Mr. Pett's house stood, respectable slumber reigned. Only the occasional drone of a passing automobile broke the silence, or the love-sick cry of some feline Romeo patrolling a wall-top.

Jimmy was awake. He was sitting on the edge of his bed watching his father put the finishing touches to his make-up, which was of a shaggy and intimidating nature. The elder Crocker had conceived the outward aspect of Chicago Ed., King of the Kidnappers, on broad and impressive lines, and one glance would have been enough to tell the sagacious observer that here was no white-souled comrade for a nocturnal saunter down lonely lanes and out-of-the-way alleys.

Mr. Crocker seemed to feel this himself.

"The only trouble is, Jim," he said, peering at himself in the glass, "shan't I scare the boy to death directly he sees me? Oughtn't I to give him some sort of warning?"

"How? Do you suggest sending him a formal note?"

Mr. Crocker surveyed his repellent features doubtfully.

"It's a good deal to spring on a kid at one in the morning," he said. "Suppose he has a fit!"

"He's far more likely to give you one. Don't you worry about Ogden, dad. I shouldn't think there was a child alive more equal to handling such a situation."

There was an empty glass standing on a tray on the dressing-table. Mr. Crocker eyed this sadly.

"I wish you hadn't thrown that stuff away, Jim. I could have done with it. I'm feeling nervous."

"Nonsense, dad! You're all right! I had to throw it away. I'm on the wagon now, but how long I should have stayed on with that smiling up at me I don't know. I've made up my mind never to lower myself to the level of the beasts that perish with the demon Rum again, because my future wife has strong views on the subject: but there's no sense in taking chances. Temptation is all very well, but you don't need it on your dressing-table. It was a kindly thought of yours to place it there, dad, but--"

"Eh? I didn't put it there."

"I thought that sort of thing came in your department. Isn't it the butler's job to supply drinks to the nobility and gentry? Well, it doesn't matter. It is now distributed over the neighbouring soil, thus removing a powerful temptation from your path. You're better without it." He looked at his watch. "Well, it ought to be all right now." He went to the window. "There's an automobile down there. I suppose it's Jerry. I told him to be outside at one sharp and it's nearly half-past. I think you might be starting, dad. Oh, by the way, you had better tell Ogden that you represent a gentleman of the name of Buck Maginnis. It was Buck who got away with him last time, and a firm friendship seems to-have sprung up between them. There's nothing like coming with a good introduction."

Mr. Crocker took a final survey of himself in the mirror.

"Gee I I'd hate to meet myself on a lonely road!"

He opened the door, and stood for a moment listening.

From somewhere down the passage came the murmur of a muffled snore.

"Third door on the left," said Jimmy. "Three--count 'em!--three. Don't go getting mixed."

Mr. Crocker slid into the outer darkness like a stout ghost, and Jimmy closed the door gently behind him.

Having launched his indulgent parent safely on a career of crime, Jimmy switched off the light and returned to the window. Leaning out, he gave himself up for a moment to sentimental musings. The night was very still. Through the trees which flanked the house the dimmed headlights of what was presumably Jerry Mitchell's hired car shone faintly like enlarged fire-flies. A boat of some description was tooting reflectively far down the river. Such was the seductive influence of the time and the scene that Jimmy might have remained there indefinitely, weaving dreams, had he not been under the necessity of making his way down to the library. It was his task to close the French windows after his father and Ogden had passed through, and he proposed to remain hid in the gallery there until the time came for him to do this. It was imperative that he avoid being seen by Ogden.

Locking his door behind him, he went downstairs. There were no signs of life in the house. Everything was still. He found the staircase leading to the gallery without having to switch on the lights.

It was dusty in the gallery, and a smell of old leather enveloped him. He hoped his father would not be long. He lowered himself cautiously to the floor, and, resting his head against a convenient shelf, began to wonder how the interview between Chicago Ed. and his prey was progressing.

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Mr. Crocker, meanwhile, masked to the eyes, had crept in fearful silence to the door which Jimmy had indicated. A good deal of the gay enthusiasm with which he had embarked on this enterprise had ebbed away from him. Now that he had become accustomed to the novelty of finding himself once more playing a character part, his intimate respectability began to assert itself. It was one thing to play Chicago Ed. at a Broadway theatre, but quite another to give a benefit performance like this. As he tip-toed along the passage, the one thing that presented itself most clearly to him was the appalling outcome of this act of his, should anything go wrong. He would have turned back, but for the thought that Jimmy was depending on him and that success would mean Jimmy's happiness. Stimulated by this reflection, he opened Ogden's door inch by inch and went in. He stole softly across the room.

He had almost reached the bed, and had just begun to wonder how on earth, now that he was there, he could open the proceedings tactfully and without alarming the boy, when he was saved the

trouble of pondering further on this problem. A light flashed out of the darkness with the suddenness of a bursting bomb, and a voice from the same general direction said "Hands up!"

When Mr. Crocker had finished blinking and had adjusted his eyes to the glare, he perceived Ogden sitting up in bed with a revolver in his hand. The revolver was resting on his knee, and its muzzle pointed directly at Mr. Crocker's ample stomach.

Exhaustive as had been the thought which Jimmy's father had given to the possible developments of his enterprise, this was a contingency of which he had not dreamed. He was entirely at a loss.

"Don't do that!" he said huskily. "It might go off!"

"I should worry!" replied Ogden coldly. "I'm at the right end of it. What are you doing here?" He looked fondly at the lethal weapon. "I got this with cigarette-coupons, to shoot rabbits when we went to the country. Here's where I get a chance at something part-human."

"Do you want to murder me?"

"Why not?"

Mr. Crocker's make-up was trickling down his face in sticky streams. The mask, however, prevented Ogden from seeing this peculiar phenomenon. He was gazing interestedly at his visitor. An idea struck him.

"Say, did you come to kidnap me?"

Mr. Crocker felt the sense of relief which he had sometimes experienced on the stage when memory had failed him during a scene and a fellow-actor had thrown him the line. It would be exaggerating to say that he was himself again. He could never be completely at his ease with that pistol pointing at him; but he felt considerably better. He lowered his voice an octave or so, and spoke in a husky growl.

"Aw, cheese it, kid. Nix on the rough stuff!"

"Keep those hands up!" advised Ogden.

"Sure! Sure!" growled Mr. Crocker. "Can the gun-play, bo! Say, you've soitanly grown since de last time we got youse!"

Ogden's manner became magically friendly.

"Are you one of Buck Maginnis' lot?" he enquired almost politely.

"Dat's right!" Mr. Crocker blessed the inspiration which had prompted Jimmy's parting words. "I'm wit Buck."

"Why didn't Buck come himself?"

"He's woiking on anudder job!"

To Mr. Crocker's profound relief Ogden lowered the pistol.

"I'm strong for Buck," he said conversationally. "We're old pals. Did you see the piece in the paper about him kidnapping me last time? I've got it in my press-clipping album."

"Sure," said Mr. Crocker.

"Say, listen. If you take me now, Buck's got to come across. I like Buck, but I'm not going to let myself be kidnapped for his benefit. It's fifty-fifty, or nothing doing. See?"

"I get you, kid."

"Well, if that's understood, all right. Give me a minute to get some clothes on, and I'll be with you."

"Don't make a noise," said Mr. Crocker.



"Who's making any noise? Say, how did you get in here?"

"T'roo de libery windows."

"I always knew some yegg would stroll in that way. It beats me why they didn't have bars fixed on them."

"Dere's a buzz-wagon outside, waitin'."

"You do it in style, don't you?" observed Ogden, pulling on his shirt. "Who's working this with you? Any one I know?"

"Naw. A new guy."

"Oh? Say, I don't remember you, if it comes to that."

"You don't?" said Mr. Crocker a little discomposed.

"Well, maybe I wouldn't, with that mask on you. Which of them are you?"

"Chicago Ed.'s my monaker."

"I don't remember any Chicago Ed."

"Well, you will after dis!" said Mr. Crocker, happily inspired.

Ogden was eyeing him with sudden suspicion.

"Take that mask off and let's have a look at you."

"Nothing doin'."

"How am I to know you're on the level?"

Mr. Crocker played a daring card.

"All right," he said, making a move towards the door. "It's up to youse. If you t'ink I'm not on de level, I'll beat it."

"Here, stop a minute," said Ogden hastily, unwilling that a promising business deal should be abandoned in this summary manner. "I'm not saying anything against you. There's no need to fly off the handle like that."

"I'll tell Buck I couldn't get you," said Mr. Crocker, moving another step.

"Here, stop! What's the matter with you?"

"Are youse comin' wit me?"

"Sure, if you get the conditions. Buck's got to slip me half of whatever he gets out of this."

"Dat's right. Buck'll slip youse half of anyt'ing he gets."

"All right, then. Wait till I've got this shoe on, and let's start. Now I'm ready."

"Beat it quietly."

"What did you think I was going to do? Sing?"

"Step dis way!" said Mr. Crocker jocosely.

They left the room cautiously. Mr. Crocker for a moment had a sense of something missing. He had reached the stairs before he realised what it was. Then it dawned upon him that what was lacking was the applause. The scene had deserved a round.

Jimmy, vigilant in the gallery, heard the library door open softly and, peering over the rail, perceived two dim forms in the darkness. One was large, the other small. They crossed the room together.

Whispered words reached him.

"I thought you said you came in this way."

"Sure."

"Then why's the shutter closed?"

"I fixed it after I was in."

There was a faint scraping sound, followed by a click. The darkness of the room was relieved by moonlight. The figures passed through. Jimmy ran down from the gallery, and closed the windows softly. He had just fastened the shutters, when from the passage outside there came the unmistakable sound of a footstep.