

## CHAPTER XXII

### IN THE LIBRARY

Jimmy's first emotion on hearing the footstep was the crude instinct of self-preservation. All that he was able to think of at the moment was the fact that he was in a questionable position and one which would require a good deal of explaining away if he were found, and his only sensation was a strong desire to avoid discovery. He made a silent, scrambling leap for the gallery stairs, and reached their shelter just as the door opened. He stood there, rigid, waiting to be challenged, but apparently he had moved in time, for no voice spoke. The door closed so gently as to be almost inaudible, and then there was silence again. The room remained in darkness, and it was this perhaps that first suggested to Jimmy the comforting thought that the intruder was equally desirous of avoiding the scrutiny of his fellows. He had taken it for granted in his first panic that he himself was the only person in that room whose motive for being there would not have borne inspection. But now, safely hidden in the gallery, out of sight from the floor below, he had the leisure to consider the newcomer's movements and to draw conclusions from them.

An honest man's first act would surely have been to switch on the lights. And an honest man would hardly have crept so stealthily. It became apparent to Jimmy, as he leaned over the rail and tried

to pierce the darkness, that there was sinister work afoot; and he had hardly reached this conclusion when his mind took a further leap and he guessed the identity of the soft-footed person below. It could be none but his old friend Lord Wisbeach, known to "the boys" as Gentleman Jack. It surprised him that he had not thought of this before. Then it surprised him that, after the talk they had only a few hours earlier in that very room, Gentleman Jack should have dared to risk this raid.

At this moment the blackness was relieved as if by the striking of a match. The man below had brought an electric torch into play, and now Jimmy could see clearly. He had been right in his surmise. It was Lord Wisbeach. He was kneeling in front of the safe. What he was doing to the safe, Jimmy could not see, for the man's body was in the way; but the electric torch shone on his face, lighting up grim, serious features quite unlike the amiable and slightly vacant mask which his lordship was wont to present to the world. As Jimmy looked, something happened in the pool of light beyond his vision. Gentleman Jack gave a muttered exclamation of satisfaction, and then Jimmy saw that the door of the safe had swung open. The air was full of a penetrating smell of scorched metal. Jimmy was not an expert in these matters, but he had read from time to time of modern burglars and their methods, and he gathered that an oxy-acetylene blow-pipe, with its flame that cuts steel as a knife cuts cheese, had been at work.

Lord Wisbeach flashed the torch into the open safe, plunged his hand in, and drew it out again, holding something. Handling this in a cautious and gingerly manner, he placed it carefully in his breast pocket. Then he straightened himself. He switched off the torch, and moved to the window, leaving the rest of his implements by the open safe. He unfastened the shutter, then raised the catch of the window. At this point it seemed to Jimmy that the time had come to interfere.

"Tut, tut!" he said in a tone of mild reproof.

The effect of the rebuke on Lord Wisbeach was remarkable. He jumped convulsively away from the window, then, revolving on his own axis, flashed the torch into every corner of the room.

"Who's that?" he gasped.

"Conscience!" said Jimmy.

Lord Wisbeach had overlooked the gallery in his researches. He now turned his torch upwards. The light flooded the gallery on the opposite side of the room from where Jimmy stood. There was a pistol in Gentleman Jack's hand now. It followed the torch uncertainly.

Jimmy, lying flat on the gallery floor, spoke again.

"Throw that gun away, and the torch, too," he said. "I've got you covered!"

The torch flashed above his head, but the raised edge of the gallery rail protected him.

"I'll give you five seconds. If you haven't dropped that gun by then, I shall shoot!"

As he began to count, Jimmy heartily regretted that he had allowed his appreciation of the dramatic to lead him into this situation. It would have been so simple to have roused the house in a prosaic way and avoided this delicate position. Suppose his bluff did not succeed. Suppose the other still clung to his pistol at the end of the five seconds. He wished that he had made it ten instead. Gentleman Jack was an enterprising person, as his previous acts had showed. He might very well decide to take a chance. He might even refuse to believe that Jimmy was armed. He had only Jimmy's word for it. Perhaps he might be as deficient in simple faith as he had proved to be in Norman blood! Jimmy lingered lovingly over his count.

"Four!" he said reluctantly.

There was a breathless moment. Then, to Jimmy's unspeakable relief, gun and torch dropped simultaneously to the floor. In an instant Jimmy was himself again.

"Go and stand with your face to that wall," he said crisply.

"Hold your hands up!"

"Why?"

"I'm going to see how many more guns you've got."

"I haven't another."

"I'd like to make sure of that for myself. Get moving!"

Gentleman Jack reluctantly obeyed. When he had reached the wall, Jimmy came down. He switched on the lights. He felt in the other's pockets, and almost at once encountered something hard and metallic.

He shook his head reproachfully.

"You are very loose and inaccurate in your statements," he said.

"Why all these weapons? I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier!

Now you can turn around and put your hands down."

Gentleman Jack's appeared to be a philosophical nature. The chagrin consequent upon his failure seemed to have left him. He sat on the arm of a chair and regarded Jimmy without apparent hostility. He even smiled a faint smile.

"I thought I had fixed you, he said. You must have been smarter than I took you for. I never supposed you would get on to that drink and pass it up."

Understanding of an incident which had perplexed him came to Jimmy.

"Was it you who put that high-ball in my room? Was it doped?"

"Didn't you know?"

"Well," said Jimmy, "I never knew before that virtue got its reward so darned quick in this world. I rejected that high-ball not because I suspected it but out of pure goodness, because I had made up my mind that I was through with all that sort of thing."

His companion laughed. If Jimmy had had a more intimate acquaintance with the resourceful individual whom the "boys" called Gentleman Jack, he would have been disquieted by that laugh. It was an axiom among those who knew him well, that when

Gentleman Jack chuckled in the reflective way, he generally had something unpleasant up his sleeve.

"It's your lucky night," said Gentleman Jack.

"It looks like it."

"Well, it isn't over yet."

"Very nearly. You had better go and put that test-tube back in what is left of the safe now. Did you think I had forgotten it?"

"What test-tube?"

"Come, come, old friend! The one filled with Partridge's explosive, which you have in your breast-pocket."

Gentleman Jack laughed again. Then he moved towards the safe.

"Place it gently on the top shelf," said Jimmy.

The next moment every nerve in his body was leaping and quivering. A great shout split the air. Gentleman Jack, apparently insane, was giving tongue at the top of his voice.

"Help! Help! Help!"

The conversation having been conducted up to this point in undertones, the effect of this unexpected uproar was like an explosion. The cries seemed to echo round the room and shake the very walls. For a moment Jimmy stood paralysed, staring feebly; then there was a sudden deafening increase in the din. Something living seemed to writhe and jump in his hand. He dropped it incontinently, and found himself gazing in a stupefied way at a round, smoking hole in the carpet. Such had been the effect of Gentleman Jack's unforeseen outburst that he had quite forgotten that he held the revolver, and he had been unfortunate enough at this juncture to pull the trigger.

There was a sudden rush and a swirl of action. Something hit Jimmy under the chin. He staggered back, and when he had recovered himself found himself looking into the muzzle of the revolver which had nearly blown a hole in his foot a moment back. The sardonic face of Gentleman Jack smiled grimly over the barrel.

"I told you the night wasn't over yet!" he said.

The blow under the chin had temporarily dulled Jimmy's mentality. He stood, swallowing and endeavouring to pull himself together and to get rid of a feeling that his head was about to come off. He backed to the desk and steadied himself against it.



As he did so, a voice from behind him spoke.

"Whassall this?"

He turned his head. A curious procession was filing in through the open French window. First came Mr. Crocker, still wearing his hideous mask; then a heavily bearded individual with round spectacles, who looked like an automobile coming through a haystack; then Ogden Ford, and finally a sturdy, determined-looking woman with glittering but poorly co-ordinated eyes, who held a large revolver in her unshaking right hand and looked the very embodiment of the modern female who will stand no nonsense. It was part of the nightmare-like atmosphere which seemed to brood inexorably over this particular night that this person looked to Jimmy exactly like the parlour-maid who had come to him in this room in answer to the bell and who had sent his father to him. Yet how could it be she? Jimmy knew little of the habits of parlour-maids, but surely they did not wander about with revolvers in the small hours?

While he endeavoured feverishly to find reason in this chaos, the door opened and a motley crowd, roused from sleep by the cries, poured in. Jimmy, turning his head back again to attend to this invasion, perceived Mrs. Pett, Ann, two or three of the geniuses, and Willie Partridge, in various stages of negligee and babbling

questions.

The woman with the pistol, assuming instant and unquestioned domination of the assembly, snapped out an order.

"Shutatdoor!"

Somebody shut the door.

"Now, whassall this?" she said, turning to Gentleman Jack.