

## CHAPTER XXIII

### STIRRING TIMES FOR THE PETTS

Gentleman Jack had lowered his revolver, and was standing waiting to explain all, with the insufferable look of the man who is just going to say that he has only done his duty and requires no thanks.

"Who are you?" he said.

"Nev' min' who I am!" said Miss Trimble curtly. "Siz Pett knows who I am."

"I hope you won't be offended, Lord Wisbeach," said Mrs. Pett from the group by the door. "I engaged a detective to help you. I really thought you could not manage everything by yourself. I hope you do not mind."

"Not at all, Mrs. Pett. Very wise."

"I'm so glad to hear you say so."

"An excellent move."

Miss Trimble broke in on these amiable exchanges.

"Whassall this? Howjer mean--help me?"

"Lord Wisbeach most kindly offered to do all he could to protect my nephew's explosive," said Mrs. Pett.

Gentleman Jack smiled modestly.

"I hope I have been of some slight assistance! I think I came down in the nick of time. Look!" He pointed to the safe. "He had just got it open! Luckily I had my pistol with me. I covered him, and called for help. In another moment he would have got away."

Miss Trimble crossed to the safe and inspected it with a frown, as if she disliked it. She gave a grunt and returned to her place by the window.

"Made good job 'f it!" was her comment.

Ann came forward. Her face was glowing and her eyes shone.

"Do you mean to say that you found Jimmy breaking into the safe? I never heard anything so absurd!"

Mrs. Pett intervened.

"This is not James Crocker, Ann! This man is an impostor, who came into the house in order to steal Willie's invention." She looked fondly at Gentleman Jack. "Lord Wisbeach told me so. He only pretended to recognise him this afternoon."

A low gurgle proceeded from the open mouth of little Ogden. The proceedings bewildered him. The scene he had overheard in the library between the two men had made it clear to him that Jimmy was genuine and Lord Wisbeach a fraud, and he could not understand why Jimmy did not produce his proofs as before. He was not aware that Jimmy's head was only just beginning to clear from the effects of the blow on the chin. Ogden braced himself for resolute lying in the event of Jimmy calling him as a witness. But he did not intend to have his little business proposition dragged into the open.

Ann was looking at Jimmy with horror-struck eyes. For the first time it came to her how little she knew of him and how very likely it was--in the face of the evidence it was almost certain--that he should have come to the house with the intention of stealing Willie's explosive. She fought against it, but a voice seemed to remind her that it was he who had suggested the idea of posing as Jimmy Crocker. She could not help remembering how smoothly and willingly he had embarked on the mad scheme. But had it been so mad? Had it not been a mere cloak for this other venture? If Lord Wisbeach had found him in this room, with

the safe blown open, what other explanation could there be?

And then, simultaneously with her conviction that he was a criminal, came the certainty that he was the man she loved. It had only needed the spectacle of him in trouble to make her sure. She came to his side with the vague idea of doing something to help him, of giving him her support. Once there, she found that there was nothing to do and nothing to say. She put her hand on his, and stood waiting helplessly for she knew not what.

It was the touch of her fingers which woke Jimmy from his stupor. He came to himself almost with a jerk. He had been mistily aware of what had been said, but speech had been beyond him. Now, quite suddenly, he was a whole man once more. He threw himself into the debate with energy.

"Good Heavens!" he cried. "You're all wrong. I found him blowing open the safe!"

Gentleman Jack smiled superciliously.

"A likely story, what! I mean to say, it's a bit thin!"

"Ridiculous!" said Mrs. Pett. She turned to Miss Trimble with a gesture. "Arrest that man!"

"Wait a mom'nt," replied that clear-headed maiden, picking her teeth thoughtfully with the muzzle of her revolver. "Wait mom'nt. Gotta look 'nto this. Hear both these guys' st'ries."

"Really," said Gentleman Jack suavely, "it seems somewhat absurd--"

"Ney' mind how 'bsurd 't sounds," returned the fair Trimble rebukingly. "You close y'r face 'n lissen t' me. Thass all you've gotta do."

"I know you didn't do it!" cried Ann, tightening her hold on Jimmy's arm.

"Less 'f it, please. Less 'f it!" Miss Trimble removed the pistol from her mouth and pointed it at Jimmy. "What've you to say? Talk quick!"

"I happened to be down there--"

"Why?" asked Miss Trimble, as if she had touched off a bomb.

Jimmy stopped short. He perceived difficulties in the way of explanation.

"I happened to be down there," he resumed stoutly, "and that man

came into the room with an electric torch and a blowpipe and began working on the safe--"

The polished tones of Gentleman Jack cut in on his story.

"Really now, is it worth while?" He turned to Miss Trimble. "I came down here, having heard a noise. I did not happen to be here for some unexplained purpose. I was lying awake and something attracted my attention. As Mrs. Pett knows, I was suspicious of this worthy and expected him to make an attempt on the explosive at any moment: so I took my pistol and crept downstairs. When I got here, the safe was open and this man making for the window."

Miss Trimble scratched her chin caressingly with the revolver, and remained for a moment in thought. Then she turned to Jimmy like a striking rattlesnake.

"Y' gotta pull someth'g better th'n that," she said. "I got y'r number. Y're caught with th' goods."

"No!" cried Ann.

"Yes!" said Mrs. Pett. "The thing is obvious."

"I think the best thing I can do," said Gentleman Jack smoothly, "is to go and telephone for the police."

"You think of everything, Lord Wisbeach," said Mrs. Pett.

"Not at all," said his lordship.

Jimmy watched him moving to the door. At the back of his mind there was a dull feeling that he could solve the whole trouble if only he could remember one fact which had escaped him. The effects of the blow he had received still handicapped him. He struggled to remember, but without result. Gentleman Jack reached the door and opened it: and as he did so a shrill yapping, hitherto inaudible because of the intervening oak and the raised voices within, made itself heard from the passage outside. Gentleman Jack closed the door with a hasty bang.

"I say that dog's out there!" he said plaintively.

The scratching of Aida's busy feet on the wood bore out his words. He looked about him, baffled.

"That dog's out there!" he repeated gloomily.

Something seemed to give way in Jimmy's brain. The simple fact which had eluded him till now sprang into his mind.

"Don't let that man get out!" he cried. "Good Lord! I've only

just remembered. You say you found me breaking into the safe! You say you heard a noise and came down to investigate! Well, then, what's that test-tube of the explosive doing in your breast-pocket?" He swung round to Miss Trimble. "You needn't take my word or his word. There's a much simpler way of finding out who's the real crook. Search us both." He began to turn out his pockets rapidly. "Look here--and here--and here! Now ask him to do the same!"

He was pleased to observe a spasm pass across Gentleman Jack's hitherto composed countenance. Miss Trimble was eyeing the latter with sudden suspicion.

"Thasso!" she said. "Say, Bill, I've f'gott'n y'r name--'sup to you to show us! Less've a look 't what y' got inside there."

Gentleman Jack drew himself up haughtily.

"I really could not agree to--"

Mrs. Pett interrupted indignantly.

"I never heard of such a thing! Lord Wisbeach is an old friend--"

"Less'f it!" ordered Miss Trimble, whose left eye was now like the left eye of a basilisk. "Y' gotta show us, Bill, so b'



quick 'bout 't!"

A tired smile played over Gentleman Jack's face. He was the bored aristocrat, mutely protesting against something that "wasn't done." He dipped his slender fingers into his pocket. Then, drawing out the test-tube, and holding it up, he spoke with a drawling calm for which even Jimmy could not help admiring him.

"All right! If I'm done, I'm done!"

The sensation caused by his action and his words was of the kind usually described as profound. Mrs. Pett uttered a strangled shriek. Willie Partridge yelped like a dog. Sharp exclamations came simultaneously from each of the geniuses.

Gentleman Jack waited for the clamour to subside. Then he resumed his gentle drawl.

"But I'm not done," he explained. "I'm going out now through that window. And if anybody tries to stop me, it will be his--or her--" he bowed politely to Miss Trimble--"last act in the world. If any one makes a move to stop me, I shall drop this test-tube and blow the whole damned place to pieces."

If his first speech had made a marked impression on his audience, his second paralysed them. A silence followed as of the tomb.

Only the yapping of the dog Aida refused to be stilled.

"Y' stay where y' are!" said Miss Trimble, as the speaker moved towards the window. She held the revolver poised, but for the first time that night--possibly for the first time in her life--she spoke irresolutely. Superbly competent woman though she was, here was a situation that baffled her.

Gentleman Jack crossed the room slowly, the test-tube held aloft between fore-finger and thumb. He was level with Miss Trimble, who had lowered her revolver and had drawn to one side, plainly at a loss to know how to handle this unprecedented crisis, when the door flew open. For an instant the face of Howard Bemis, the poet, was visible.

"Mrs. Pett, I have telephoned--"

Then another voice interrupted him.

"Yipe! Yipe! Yipe!"

Through the opening the dog Aida, rejoicing in the removal of the obstacle, raced like a fur muff mysteriously endowed with legs and a tongue. She tore across the room to where Gentleman Jack's ankles waited invitingly. Ever since their first meeting she had wanted a fair chance at those ankles, but some one had always

prevented her.

"Damn!" shouted Gentleman Jack.

The word was drowned in one vast cataclysm of noise. From every throat in the room there proceeded a shout, a shriek, or some other variety of cry, as the test-tube, slipping from between the victim's fingers, described a parabola through the air.

Ann flung herself into Jimmy's arms, and he held her tight. He shut his eyes. Even as he waited for the end the thought flashed through his mind that, if he must die, this was the manner of death which he would prefer.

The test-tube crashed on the writing-desk, and burst into a million pieces. . . .

Jimmy opened his eyes. Things seemed to be much about the same as before. He was still alive. The room in which he stood was solid and intact. Nobody was in fragments. There was only one respect in which the scene differed from what it had been a moment before. Then, it had contained Gentleman Jack. Now it did not.

A great sigh seemed to sweep through the room. There was a long silence. Then, from the direction of the street, came the roar of a starting automobile. And at that sound the bearded man with the

spectacles who had formed part of Miss Trimble's procession uttered a wailing cry.

"Gee! He's beat it in my bubble! And it was a hired one!"

The words seemed to relieve the tension in the air. One by one the company became masters of themselves once more. Miss Trimble, that masterly woman, was the first to recover. She raised herself from the floor--for with a confused idea that she would be safer there she had flung herself down--and, having dusted her skirt with a few decisive dabs of her strong left hand, addressed herself once more to business.

"I let 'm bluff me with a fake bomb!" she commented bitterly. She brooded on this for a moment. "Say, shut th't door 'gain, some one, and t'run this mutt out. I can't think with th't yapping going on."

Mrs. Pett, pale and scared, gathered Aida into her arms. At the same time Ann removed herself from Jimmy's. She did not look at him. She was feeling oddly shy. Shyness had never been a failing of hers, but she would have given much now to have been elsewhere.

Miss Trimble again took charge of the situation. The sound of the automobile had died away. Gentleman Jack had passed out of their

lives. This fact embittered Miss Trimble. She spoke with asperity.

"Well, he's gone!" she said acidly. "Now we can get down t' cases again. Say!" She addressed Mrs. Pett, who started nervously. The experience of passing through the shadow of the valley of death and of finding herself in one piece instead of several thousand had robbed her of all her wonted masterfulness. "Say, list'n t' me. There's been a double game on here t'night. That guy that's jus' gone was th' first part of th' entertainment. Now we c'n start th' sec'nd part. You see these ducks?" She indicated with a wave of the revolver Mr. Crocker and his bearded comrade. "They've been trying t' kidnap y'r son!"

Mrs. Pett uttered a piercing cry.

"Oggie!"

"Oh, can it!" muttered that youth, uncomfortably. He foresaw awkward moments ahead, and he wished to concentrate his faculties entirely on the part he was to play in them. He looked sideways at Chicago Ed. In a few minutes, he supposed, Ed. would be attempting to minimise his own crimes, by pretending that he, Ogden, had invited him to come and kidnap him. Stout denial must be his weapon.

"I had m' suspicions," resumed Miss Trimble, "that someth'ng was goin' t' be pulled off to-night, 'nd I was waiting outside fr it to break loose. This guy here," she indicated the bearded plotter, who blinked deprecatingly through his spectacles, "h's been waiting on the c'rner of th' street for the last hour with 'n automobile. I've b'n watching him right along. I was onto h's game! Well, just now out came the kid with this plug-ugly here." She turned to Mr. Crocker. "Say you! Take off th't mask. Let's have a l'k at you!"

Mr. Crocker reluctantly drew the cambric from his face.

"Goosh!" exclaimed Miss Trimble in strong distaste. "Say, 've you got some kind of a plague, or wh't is it? Y'look like a coloured comic supplement!" She confronted the shrinking Mr. Crocker and ran a bony finger over his cheek. "Make-up!" she said, eyeing the stains disgustedly. "Grease paint! Goosh!"

"Skinner!" cried Mrs. Pett.

Miss Trimble scanned her victim more closely.

"So 't is, if y' do a bit 'f excavating." She turned on the bearded one. "'nd I guess all this shrubbery is fake, 'f you come down to it!" She wrenched at the unhappy man's beard. It came off in her hands, leaving a square chin behind it. "If this ain't a

wig, y'll have a headache t'morrow," observed Miss Trimble, weaving her fingers into his luxuriant head-covering and pulling. "Wish y' luck! Ah! 'twas a wig. Gimme those spect'cles." She surveyed the results of her handiwork grimly. "Say, Clarence," she remarked, "y're a wise guy. Y' look handsomer with 'em on. Does any one know this duck?"

"It is Mitchell," said Mrs. Pett. "My husband's physical instructor."

Miss Trimble turned, and, walking to Jimmy, tapped him meaningly on the chest with her revolver.

"Say, this is gett'n interesting! This is where y' 'xplain, y'ng man, how 'twas you happened to be down in this room when th't crook who's just gone was monkeyin' with the safe. L'ks t' me as if you were in with these two."

A feeling of being on the verge of one of those crises which dot the smooth path of our lives came to Jimmy. To conceal his identity from Ann any longer seemed impossible. He was about to speak, when Ann broke in.

"Aunt Nesta," she said, "I can't let this go on any longer. Jerry Mitchell isn't to blame. I told him to kidnap Ogden!"

There was an awkward silence. Mrs. Pett laughed nervously.

"I think you had better go to bed, my dear child. You have had a severe shock. You are not yourself."

"But it's true! I did tell him, didn't I, Jerry?"

"Say!" Miss Trimble silenced Jerry with a gesture. "You beat 't back t' y'r little bed, honey, like y'r aunt says. Y' say y' told this guy t' steal th' kid. Well, what about this here Skinner? Y' didn't tell him, did y'?"

"I--I--" Ann began confusedly. She was utterly unable to account for Skinner, and it made her task of explaining difficult.

Jimmy came to the rescue. He did not like to think how Ann would receive the news, but for her own sake he must speak now. It would have required a harder-hearted man than himself to resist the mute pleading of his father's grease-painted face. Mr. Crocker was a game sport: he would not have said a word without the sign from Jimmy, even to save himself from a night in prison, but he hoped that Jimmy would speak.

"It's perfectly simple," said Jimmy, with an attempt at airiness which broke down miserably under Miss Trimble's eye. "Perfectly simple. I really am Jimmy Crocker, you know." He avoided Ann's



gaze. "I can't think what you are making all this fuss about."

"Th'n why did y' sit in at a plot to kidnap this boy?"

"That, of course--ha, ha!--might seem at first sight to require a little explanation."

"Y' admit it, then?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I did have the idea of kidnapping Ogden. Wanted to send him to a dogs' hospital, if you understand what I mean." He tried to smile a conciliatory smile, but, encountering Miss Trimble's left eye, abandoned the project. He removed a bead of perspiration from his forehead with his handkerchief. It struck him as a very curious thing that the simplest explanations were so often quite difficult to make.

"Before I go any further, I ought to explain one thing. Skinner there is my father."

Mrs. Pett gasped.

"Skinner was my sister's butler in London."

"In a way of speaking," said Jimmy, "that is correct. It's rather a long story. It was this way, you see. . . ."

Miss Trimble uttered an ejaculation of supreme contempt.

"I n'ver saw such a lot of babbl'ng crooks in m' life! 't beats me what y' hope to get pulling this stuff. Say!" She indicated Mr. Crocker. "This guy's wanted f'r something over in England. We've got h's photographs 'n th' office. If y' ask me, he lit out with the spoons 'r something. Say!" She fixed one of the geniuses with her compelling eye. "'Bout time y' made y'rself useful. Go'n call up th' Astorbilt on th' phone. There's a dame there that's been making the enquiries f'r this duck. She told Anderson's--and Anderson's handed it on to us--to call her up any hour of the day 'r night when they found him. You go get her on the wire and t'll her t' come right up here'n a taxi and identify him."

The genius paused at the door.

"Whom shall I ask for?"

"Mrs. Crocker," snapped Miss Trimble. "Siz Bingley Crocker. Tell her we've found th' guy she's been looking for!"

The genius backed out. There was a howl of anguish from the doorway.

"I beg your pardon!" said the genius.

"Can't you look where you're going!"

"I am exceedingly sorry--"

"Brrh!"

Mr. Pett entered the room, hopping. He was holding one slippers foot in his hand and appeared to be submitting it to some form of massage. It was plain that the usually mild and gentle little man was in a bad temper. He glowered round him at the company assembled.

"What the devil's the matter here?" he demanded. "I stood it as long as I could, but a man can't get a wink of sleep with this noise going on!"

"Yipe! Yipe! Yipe!" barked Aida from the shelter of Mrs. Pett's arms.

Mr. Pett started violently.

"Kill that dog! Throw her out! Do something to her!"

Mrs. Pett was staring blankly at her husband. She had never seen him like this before. It was as if a rabbit had turned and growled at her. Coming on top of the crowded sensations of the

night, it had the effect of making her feel curiously weak. In all her married life she had never known what fear was. She had coped dauntlessly with the late Mr. Ford, a man of a spirited temperament; and as for the mild Mr. Pett she had trampled on him. But now she felt afraid. This new Peter intimidated her.