

CHAPTER XXIV

SENSATIONAL TURNING OF A WORM

To this remarkable metamorphosis in Mr. Peter Pett several causes had contributed. In the first place, the sudden dismissal of Jerry Mitchell had obliged him to go two days without the physical exercises to which his system had become accustomed, and this had produced a heavy, irritable condition of body and mind. He had brooded on the injustice of his lot until he had almost worked himself up to rebellion. And then, as sometimes happened with him when he was out of sorts, a touch of gout came to add to his troubles. Being a patient man by nature, he might have borne up against these trials, had he been granted an adequate night's rest. But, just as he had dropped off after tossing restlessly for two hours, things had begun to happen noisily in the library. He awoke to a vague realisation of tumult below.

Such was the morose condition of his mind as the result of his misfortune that at first not even the cries for help could interest him sufficiently to induce him to leave his bed. He knew that walking in his present state would be painful, and he declined to submit to any more pain just because some party unknown was apparently being murdered in his library. It was not until the shrill barking of the dog Aida penetrated right in among his nerve-centres and began to tie them into knots that he

found himself compelled to descend. Even when he did so, it was in no spirit of kindness. He did not come to rescue anybody or to interfere between any murderer and his victim. He came in a fever of militant wrath to suppress Aida. On the threshold of the library, however, the genius, by treading on his gouty foot, had diverted his anger and caused it to become more general. He had not ceased to concentrate his venom on Aida. He wanted to assail everybody.

"What's the matter here?" he demanded, red-eyed. "Isn't somebody going to tell me? Have I got to stop here all night? Who on earth is this?" He glared at Miss Trimble. "What's she doing with that pistol?" He stamped incautiously with his bad foot, and emitted a dry howl of anguish.

"She is a detective, Peter," said Mrs. Pett timidly.

"A detective? Why? Where did she come from?"

Miss Trimble took it upon herself to explain.

"Mister Pett, siz Pett sent fr me t' watch out so's nobody kidnapped her son."

"Oggie," explained Mrs. Pett. "Miss Trimble was guarding darling Oggie."

"Why?"

"To--to prevent him being kidnapped, Peter."

Mr. Pett glowered at the stout boy. Then his eye was attracted by the forlorn figure of Jerry Mitchell. He started.

"Was this fellow kidnapping the boy?" he asked.

"Sure," said Miss Trimble. "Caught h'm with th' goods. He w's waiting outside there with a car. I held h'm and this other guy up w'th a gun and brought 'em back!"

"Jerry," said Mr. Pett, "it wasn't your fault that you didn't bring it off, and I'm going to treat you right. You'd have done it if nobody had butted in to stop you. You'll get the money to start that health-farm of yours all right. I'll see to that. Now you run off to bed. There's nothing to keep you here."

"Say!" cried Miss Trimble, outraged. "D'ya mean t' say y' aren't going t' pros'cute? Why, aren't I tell'ng y' I caught h'm kidnapping th' boy?"

"I told him to kidnap the boy!" snarled Mr. Pett.

"Peter!"

Mr. Pett looked like an under-sized lion as he faced his wife. He bristled. The recollection of all that he had suffered from Ogden came to strengthen his determination.

"I've tried for two years to get you to send that boy to a good boarding-school, and you wouldn't do it. I couldn't stand having him loafing around the house any longer, so I told Jerry Mitchell to take him away to a friend of his who keeps a dogs' hospital on Long Island and to tell his friend to hold him there till he got some sense into him. Well, you've spoiled that for the moment with your detectives, but it still looks good to me. I'll give you a choice. You can either send that boy to a boarding-school next week, or he goes to Jerry Mitchell's friend. I'm not going to have him in the house any longer, loafing in my chair and smoking my cigarettes. Which is it to be?"

"But, Peter!"

"Well?"

"If I send him to a school, he may be kidnapped."

"Kidnapping can't hurt him. It's what he needs. And, anyway, if he is I'll pay the bill and be glad to do it. Take him off to bed

now. To-morrow you can start looking up schools. Great Godfrey!" He hopped to the writing-desk and glared disgustedly at the debris on it. "Who's been making this mess on my desk? It's hard! It's darned hard! The only room in the house that I ask to have for my own, where I can get a little peace, and I find it turned into a beer-garden, and coffee or some damned thing spilled all over my writing-desk!"

"That isn't coffee, Peter," said Mrs. Pett mildly. This cave-man whom she had married under the impression that he was a gentle domestic pet had taken all the spirit out of her. "It's Willie's explosive."

"Willie's explosive?"

"Lord Wisbeach--I mean the man who pretended to be Lord Wisbeach--dropped it there."

"Dropped it there? Well, why didn't it explode and blow the place to Hoboken, then?"

Mrs. Pett looked helplessly at Willie, who thrust his fingers into his mop of hair and rolled his eyes.

"There was fortunately some slight miscalculation in my formula, uncle Peter," he said. "I shall have to look into it to-morrow.

Whether the trinitrotoluol--"

Mr. Pett uttered a sharp howl. He beat the air with his clenched fists. He seemed to be having a brain-storm.

"Has this--this fish been living on me all this time--have I been supporting this--this buzzard in luxury all these years while he fooled about with an explosive that won't explode! He pointed an accusing finger at the inventor. Look into it tomorrow, will you? Yes, you can look into it to-morrow after six o'clock! Until then you'll be working--for the first time in your life--working in my office, where you ought to have been all along." He surveyed the crowded room belligerently. "Now perhaps you will all go back to bed and let people get a little sleep. Go home!" he said to the detective.

Miss Trimble stood her ground. She watched Mrs. Pett pass away with Ogden, and Willie Partridge head a stampede of geniuses, but she declined to move.

"Y' gotta cut th' rough stuff, 'ster Pett," she said calmly. "I need my sleep, j'st 's much 's everyb'dy else, but I gotta stay here. There's a lady c'ming right up in a taxi fr'm th' Astorbilt to identify this gook. She's after'm f'r something."

"What! Skinner?"

"'s what he calls h'mself."

"What's he done?"

"I d'no. Th' lady'll tell us that."

There was a violent ringing at the front door bell.

"I guess that's her," said Miss Trimble. "Who's going to let 'r in? I can't go."

"I will," said Ann.

Mr. Pett regarded Mr. Crocker with affectionate encouragement.

"I don't know what you've done, Skinner," he said, "but I'll stand by you. You're the best fan I ever met, and if I can keep you out of the penitentiary, I will."

"It isn't the penitentiary!" said Mr. Crocker unhappily.

A tall, handsome, and determined-looking woman came into the room. She stood in the doorway, looking about her. Then her eyes rested on Mr. Crocker. For a moment she gazed incredulously at his discoloured face. She drew a little nearer, peering.

"D'yo 'dentify 'm, ma'am?" said Miss Trimble.

"Bingley!"

"Is 't th' guy y' wanted?"

"It's my husband!" said Mrs. Crocker.

"Y' can't arrest 'm fr that!" said Miss Trimble disgustedly.

She thrust her revolver back into the hinterland of her costume.

"Guess I'll be beatin' it," she said with a sombre frown. She was plainly in no sunny mood. "'f all th' hunk jobs I was ever on, this is th' hunkest. I'm told off 't watch a gang of crooks, and after I've lost a night's sleep doing it, it turns out 't's a nice, jolly fam'ly party!" She jerked her thumb towards Jimmy.

"Say, this guy says he's that guy's son. I s'pose it's all right?"

"That is my step-son, James Crocker."

Ann uttered a little cry, but it was lost in Miss Trimble's stupendous snort. The detective turned to the window.

"I guess I'll beat 't," she observed caustically, "before it turns out that I'm y'r l'il daughter Genevieve."