

CHAPTER XXVI

EVERYBODY HAPPY

Jimmy looked at Ann. They were alone. Mr. Pett had gone back to bed, Mrs. Crocker to her hotel. Mr. Crocker was removing his make-up in his room. A silence had followed their departure.

"This is the end of a perfect day!" said Jimmy.

Ann took a step towards the door.

"Don't go!"

Ann stopped.

"Mr. Crocker!" she said.

"Jimmy," he corrected.

"Mr. Crocker!" repeated Ann firmly.

"Or Algernon, if you prefer it."

"May I ask--" Ann regarded him steadily. "May I ask."

"Nearly always," said Jimmy, "when people begin with that, they are going to say something unpleasant."

"May I ask why you went to all this trouble to make a fool of me? Why could you not have told me who you were from the start?"

"Have you forgotten all the harsh things you said to me from time to time about Jimmy Crocker? I thought that, if you knew who I was, you would have nothing more to do with me."

"You were quite right."

"Surely, though, you won't let a thing that happened five years ago make so much difference?"

"I shall never forgive you!"

"And yet, a little while ago, when Willie's bomb was about to go off, you flung yourself into my arms!"

Ann's face flamed.

"I lost my balance."

"Why try to recover it?"

Ann bit her lip.

"You did a cruel, heartless thing. What does it matter how long ago it was? If you were capable of it then--"

"Be reasonable. Don't you admit the possibility of reformation?

Take your own case. Five years ago you were a minor poetess. Now you are an amateur kidnapper--a bright, lovable girl at whose approach people lock up their children and sit on the key. As for me, five years ago I was a heartless brute. Now I am a sober serious business-man, specially called in by your uncle to help jack up his tottering firm. Why not bury the dead past?

Besides--I don't want to praise myself, I just want to call your attention to it--think what I have done for you. You admitted yourself that it was my influence that had revolutionised your character. But for me, you would now be doing worse than write poetry. You would be writing vers libre. I saved you from that. And you spurn me!"

"I hate you!" said Ann.

Jimmy went to the writing-desk and took up a small book.

"Put that down!"

"I just wanted to read you 'Love's Funeral!' It illustrates my

point. Think of yourself as you are now, and remember that it is I who am responsible for the improvement. Here we are. 'Love's Funeral.' 'My heart is dead. . . .'

Ann snatched the book from his hands and flung it away. It soared up, clearing the gallery rails, and fell with a thud on the gallery floor. She stood facing him with sparkling eyes. Then she moved away.

"I beg your pardon," she said stiffly. "I lost my temper."

"It's your hair," said Jimmy soothingly. "You're bound to be quick-tempered with hair of that glorious red shade. You must marry some nice, determined fellow, blue-eyed, dark-haired, clean-shaven, about five foot eleven, with a future in business. He will keep you in order."

"Mr. Crocker!"

"Gently, of course. Kindly-lovingly. The velvet thingummy rather than the iron what's-its-name. But nevertheless firmly."

Ann was at the door.

"To a girl with your ardent nature some one with whom you can quarrel is an absolute necessity of life. You and I are

affinities. Ours will be an ideally happy marriage. You would be miserable if you had to go through life with a human doormat with 'Welcome' written on him. You want some one made of sterner stuff. You want, as it were, a sparring-partner, some one with whom you can quarrel happily with the certain knowledge that he will not curl up in a ball for you to kick, but will be there with the return wallop. I may have my faults--" He paused expectantly. Ann remained silent. "No, no!" he went on. "But I am such a man. Brisk give-and-take is the foundation of the happy marriage. Do you remember that beautiful line of Tennyson's--'We fell out, my wife and I'? It always conjures up for me a vision of wonderful domestic happiness. I seem to see us in our old age, you on one side of the radiator, I on the other, warming our old limbs and thinking up snappy stuff to hand to each other--sweethearts still! If I were to go out of your life now, you would be miserable. You would have nobody to quarrel with. You would be in the position of the female jaguar of the Indian jungle, who, as you doubtless know, expresses her affection for her mate by biting him shrewdly in the fleshy part of the leg, if she should snap sideways one day and find nothing there."

Of all the things which Ann had been trying to say during this discourse, only one succeeded in finding expression. To her mortification, it was the only weak one in the collection.

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"I am."

"I won't!"

"You think so now, because I am not appearing at my best. You see me nervous, diffident, tongue-tied. All this will wear off, however, and you will be surprised and delighted as you begin to understand my true self. Beneath the surface--I speak conservatively--I am a corker!"

The door banged behind Ann. Jimmy found himself alone. He walked thoughtfully to Mr. Pett's armchair and sat down. There was a feeling of desolation upon him. He lit a cigarette and began to smoke pensively. What a fool he had been to talk like that! What girl of spirit could possibly stand it? If ever there had been a time for being soothing and serious and pleading, it had been these last few minutes. And he talked like that!

Ten minutes passed. Jimmy sprang from his chair. He thought he had heard a footstep. He flung the door open. The passage was empty. He returned miserably to his chair. Of course she had not come back. Why should she?

A voice spoke.

"Jimmy!"

He leaped up again, and looked wildly round. Then he looked up.
Ann was leaning over the gallery rail.

"Jimmy, I've been thinking it over. There's something I want to ask you. Do you admit that you behaved abominably five years ago?"

"Yes!" shouted Jimmy.

"And that you've been behaving just as badly ever since?"

"Yes!"

"And that you are really a pretty awful sort of person?"

"Yes!"

"Then it's all right. You deserve it!"

"Deserve it?"

"Deserve to marry a girl like me. I was worried about it, but now I see that it's the only punishment bad enough for you!" She raised her arm.

"Here's the dead past, Jimmy! Go and bury it! Good-night!"

A small book fell squashily at Jimmy's feet. He regarded it dully for a moment. Then, with a wild yell which penetrated even to Mr. Pett's bedroom and woke that sufferer just as he was dropping off to sleep for the third time that night he bounded for the gallery stairs.

At the further end of the gallery a musical laugh sounded, and a door closed. Ann had gone.