

CHAPTER V (Part 3)

In order that their gayety might not be diminished—and the food turned to ashes in their mouths by the absence from the festive board of Mr. Beach, it was the custom for the upper servants at Blandings to postpone the start of their evening meal until dinner was nearly over above-stairs. This enabled the butler to take his place at the head of the table without fear of interruption, except for the few moments when coffee was being served.

Every night shortly before half-past eight—at which hour Mr. Beach felt that he might safely withdraw from the dining-room and leave Lord Emsworth and his guests to the care of Merridew, the under-butler, and James and Alfred, the footmen, returning only for a few minutes to lend tone and distinction to the distribution of cigars and liqueurs—those whose rank entitled them to do so made their way to the housekeeper's room, to pass in desultory conversation the interval before Mr. Beach should arrive, and a kitchen maid, with the appearance of one who has been straining at the leash and has at last managed to get free, opened the door, with the announcement: "Mr. Beach, if you please, dinner is served." On which Mr. Beach, extending a crooked elbow toward the housekeeper, would say, "Mrs. Twemlow!" and lead the way, high and disposedly, down the passage, followed in order of rank by the rest of the company, in couples, to the steward's room.

For Blandings was not one of those houses—or shall we say hovels?—where the upper servants are expected not only to feed but to congregate before feeding in the steward's room. Under the auspices of Mr. Beach and of Mrs. Twemlow, who saw eye to eye

with him in these matters, things were done properly at the castle, with the correct solemnity. To Mr. Beach and Mrs. Twemlow the suggestion that they and their peers should gather together in the same room in which they were to dine would have been as repellent as an announcement from Lady Ann Warblington, the chatelaine, that the house party would eat in the drawing-room.

When Ashe, returning from his interview with Mr. Peters, was intercepted by a respectful small boy and conducted to the housekeeper's room, he was conscious of a sensation of shrinking inferiority akin to his emotions on his first day at school. The room was full and apparently on very cordial terms with itself. Everybody seemed to know everybody and conversation was proceeding in a manner reminiscent of an Old Home Week.

As a matter of fact, the house party at Blandings being in the main a gathering together of the Emsworth clan by way of honor and as a means of introduction to Mr. Peters and his daughter, the bride-of-the-house-to-be, most of the occupants of the housekeeper's room were old acquaintances and were renewing interrupted friendships at the top of their voices.

A lull followed Ashe's arrival and all eyes, to his great discomfort, were turned in his direction. His embarrassment was relieved by Mrs. Twemlow, who advanced to do the honors. Of Mrs. Twemlow little need be attempted in the way of pen portraiture beyond the statement that she went as harmoniously with Mr. Beach as one of a pair of vases or one of a brace of pheasants goes with its fellow. She had the same appearance of imminent apoplexy, the same air of belonging to some dignified and haughty branch of the vegetable kingdom.

"Mr. Marson, welcome to Blandings Castle!"

Ashe had been waiting for somebody to say this, and had been a little surprised that Mr. Beach had not done so. He was also

surprised at the housekeeper's ready recognition of his identity, until he saw Joan in the throng and deduced that she must have been the source of information.

He envied Joan. In some amazing way she contrived to look not out of place in this gathering. He himself, he felt, had impostor stamped in large characters all over him.

Mrs. Twemlow began to make the introductions—a long and tedious process, which she performed relentlessly, without haste and without scamping her work. With each member of the aristocracy of his new profession Ashe shook hands, and on each member he smiled, until his facial and dorsal muscles were like to crack under the strain. It was amazing that so many high-class domestics could be collected into one moderate-sized room.

"Miss Simpson you know," said Mrs. Twemlow, and Ashe was about to deny the charge when he perceived that Joan was the individual referred to. "Mr. Judson, Mr. Marson. Mr. Judson is the Honorable Frederick's gentleman."

"You have not the pleasure of our Freddie's acquaintance as yet, I take it, Mr. Marson?" observed Mr. Judson genially, a smooth-faced, lazy-looking young man. "Freddie repays inspection."

"Mr. Marson, permit me to introduce you to Mr. Ferris, Lord Stockheath's gentleman."

Mr. Ferris, a dark, cynical man, with a high forehead, shook Ashe by the hand.

"Happy to meet you, Mr. Marson."

"Miss Willoughby, this is Mr. Marson, who will take you in to dinner. Miss Willoughby is Lady Mildred Mant's lady. As of course you are aware, Lady Mildred, our eldest daughter, married Colonel Horace Mant, of the Scots Guards."

Ashe was not aware, and he was rather surprised that Mrs. Twemlow should have a daughter whose name was Lady Mildred; but reason, coming to his rescue, suggested that by our she meant the offspring of the Earl of Emsworth and his late countess. Miss Willoughby was a light-hearted damsel, with a smiling face and chestnut hair, done low over her forehead.

Since etiquette forbade that he should take Joan in to dinner, Ashe was glad that at least an apparently pleasant substitute had been provided. He had just been introduced to an appallingly statuesque lady of the name of Chester, Lady Ann Warblington's own maid, and his somewhat hazy recollections of Joan's lecture on below-stairs precedence had left him with the impression that this was his destined partner. He had frankly quailed at the prospect of being linked to so much aristocratic hauteur.

When the final introduction had been made conversation broke out again. It dealt almost exclusively, so far as Ashe could follow it, with the idiosyncrasies of the employers of those present. He took it that this happened down the entire social scale below stairs. Probably the lower servants in the servants' hall discussed the upper servants in the room, and the still lower servants in the housemaids' sitting-room discussed their superiors of the servants' hall, and the stillroom gossiped about the housemaids' sitting-room.

He wondered which was the bottom circle of all, and came to the conclusion that it was probably represented by the small respectful boy who had acted as his guide a short while before. This boy, having nobody to discuss anybody with, presumably sat in solitary meditation, brooding on the odd-job man.

He thought of mentioning this theory to Miss Willoughby, but decided that it was too abstruse for her, and contented himself with speaking of some of the plays he had seen before leaving London.

Miss Willoughby was an enthusiast on the drama; and, Colonel Mant's military duties keeping him much in town, she had had wide opportunities of indulging her tastes. Miss Willoughby did not like the country. She thought it dull.

"Don't you think the country dull, Mr. Marson?"

"I shan't find it dull here," said Ashe; and he was surprised to discover, through the medium of a pleased giggle, that he was considered to have perpetrated a compliment.

Mr. Beach appeared in due season, a little distraught, as becomes a man who has just been engaged on important and responsible duties.

"Alfred spilled the hock!" Ashe heard him announce to Mrs. Twemlow in a bitter undertone. "Within half an inch of his lordship's arm he spilled it."

Mrs. Twemlow murmured condolences. Mr. Beach's set expression was of one who is wondering how long the strain of existence can be supported.

"Mr. Beach, if you please, dinner is served."

The butler crushed down sad thoughts and crooked his elbow.

"Mrs. Twemlow!"

Ashe, miscalculating degrees of rank in spite of all his caution, was within a step of leaving the room out of his proper turn; but the startled pressure of Miss Willoughby's hand on his arm warned him in time. He stopped, to allow the statuesque Miss Chester to sail out under escort of a wizened little man with a horseshoe pin in his tie, whose name, in company with nearly all the others that had been spoken to him since he came into the room, had escaped Ashe's memory.

"You were nearly making a bloomer!" said Miss Willoughby brightly. "You must be absent-minded, Mr. Marson—like his lordship."

"Is Lord Emsworth absent-minded?"

Miss Willoughby laughed.

"Why, he forgets his own name sometimes! If it wasn't for Mr. Baxter, goodness knows what would happen to him."

"I don't think I know Mr. Baxter."

"You will if you stay here long. You can't get away from him if you're in the same house. Don't tell anyone I said so; but he's the real master here. His lordship's secretary he calls himself; but he's really everything rolled into one—like the man in the play."

Ashe, searching in his dramatic memories for such a person in a play, inquired whether Miss Willoughby meant Pooh-Bah, in "The Mikado," of which there had been a revival in London recently. Miss Willoughby did mean Pooh-Bah.

"But Nosy Parker is what I call him," she said. "He minds everybody's business as well as his own."

The last of the procession trickled into the steward's room. Mr. Beach said grace somewhat patronizingly. The meal began.

"You've seen Miss Peters, of course, Mr. Marson?" said Miss Willoughby, resuming conversation with the soup.

"Just for a few minutes at Paddington."

"Oh! You haven't been with Mr. Peters long, then?"

Ashe began to wonder whether everybody he met was going to ask him this dangerous question.

"Only a day or so."

"Where were you before that?"

Ashe was conscious of a prickly sensation. A little more of this and he might as well reveal his true mission at the castle and have done with it.

"Oh, I was—that is to say——"

"How are you feeling after the journey, Mr. Marson?" said a voice from the other side of the table; and Ashe, looking up gratefully, found Joan's eyes looking into his with a curiously amused expression.

He was too grateful for the interruption to try to account for this. He replied that he was feeling very well, which was not the case. Miss Willoughby's interest was diverted to a discussion of the defects of the various railroad systems of Great Britain.

At the head of the table Mr. Beach had started an intimate conversation with Mr. Ferris, the valet of Lord Stockheath, the Honorable Freddie's "poor old Percy"—a cousin, Ashe had gathered, of Aline Peters' husband-to-be. The butler spoke in more measured tones even than usual, for he was speaking of tragedy.

"We were all extremely sorry, Mr. Ferris, to read of your misfortune."

Ashe wondered what had been happening to Mr. Ferris.

"Yes, Mr. Beach," replied the valet, "it's a fact we made a pretty poor show." He took a sip from his glass. "There is no concealing the fact—I have never tried to conceal it—that poor Percy is not bright."

Miss Chester entered the conversation.

"I couldn't see where the girl—what's her name? was so very pretty. All the papers had pieces where it said she was attractive, and what not; but she didn't look anything special to me from her photograph in the Mirror. What his lordship could see in her I can't understand."

"The photo didn't quite do her justice, Miss Chester. I was present in court, and I must admit she was svelte—decidedly svelte. And you must recollect that Percy, from childhood up, has always been a highly susceptible young nut. I speak as one who knows him."

Mr. Beach turned to Joan.

"We are speaking of the Stockheath breach-of-promise case, Miss Simpson, of which you doubtless read in the newspapers. Lord Stockheath is a nephew of ours. I fancy his lordship was greatly shocked at the occurrence."

"He was," chimed in Mr. Judson from down the table. "I happened to overhear him speaking of it to young Freddie. It was in the library on the morning when the judge made his final summing up and slipped it into Lord Stockheath so proper. 'If ever anything of this sort happens to you, you young scalawag,' he says to Freddie—"

Mr. Beach coughed. "Mr. Judson!"

"Oh, it's all right, Mr. Beach; we're all in the family here, in a manner of speaking. It wasn't as though I was telling it to a lot of outsiders. I'm sure none of these ladies or gentlemen will let it go beyond this room?"

The company murmured virtuous acquiescence.

"He says to Freddie: 'You young scalawag, if ever anything of this sort happens to you, you can pack up and go off to Canada, for I'll

have nothing more to do with you!"—or words to that effect. And Freddie says: 'Oh, dash it all, gov'nor, you know—what?'"

However short Mr. Judson's imitation of his master's voice may have fallen of histrionic perfection, it pleased the company. The room shook with mirth.

"Mr. Judson is clever, isn't he, Mr. Marson?" whispered Miss Willoughby, gazing with adoring eyes at the speaker.

Mr. Beach thought it expedient to deflect the conversation. By the unwritten law of the room every individual had the right to speak as freely as he wished about his own personal employer; but Judson, in his opinion, sometimes went a trifle too far.

"Tell me, Mr. Ferris," he said, "does his lordship seem to bear it well?"

"Oh, Percy is bearing it well enough."

Ashe noted as a curious fact that, though the actual valet of any person under discussion spoke of him almost affectionately by his Christian name, the rest of the company used the greatest ceremony and gave him his title with all respect. Lord Stockheath was Percy to Mr. Ferris, and the Honorable Frederick Threepwood was Freddie to Mr. Judson; but to Ferris, Mr. Judson's Freddie was the Honorable Frederick, and to Judson Mr. Ferris' Percy was Lord Stockheath. It was rather a pleasant form of etiquette, and struck Ashe as somehow vaguely feudal.

"Percy," went on Mr. Ferris, "is bearing it like a little Briton—the damages not having come out of his pocket! It's his old father—who had to pay them—that's taking it to heart. You might say he's doing himself proud. He says it's brought on his gout again, and that's why he's gone to Droitwich instead of coming here. I dare say Percy isn't sorry."

"It has been," said Mr. Beach, summing up, "a most unfortunate occurrence. The modern tendency of the lower classes to get above themselves is becoming more marked every day. The young female in this case was, I understand, a barmaid. It is deplorable that our young men should allow themselves to get into such entanglements."

"The wonder to me," said the irrepressible Mr. Judson, "is that more of these young chaps don't get put through it. His lordship wasn't so wide of the mark when he spoke like that to Freddie in the library that time. I give you my word, it's a mercy young Freddie hasn't been up against it! When we were in London, Freddie and I," he went on, cutting through Mr. Beach's disapproving cough, "before what you might call the crash, when his lordship cut off supplies and had him come back and live here, Freddie was asking for it—believe me! Fell in love with a girl in the chorus of one of the theaters. Used to send me to the stage door with notes and flowers every night for weeks, as regular as clockwork.

"What was her name? It's on the tip of my tongue. Funny how you forget these things! Freddie was pretty far gone. I recollect once, happening to be looking round his room in his absence, coming on a poem he had written to her. It was hot stuff—very hot! If that girl has kept those letters it's my belief we shall see Freddie following in Lord Stockheath's footsteps."

There was a hush of delighted horror round the table.

"Goo'," said Miss Chester's escort with unction. "You don't say so, Mr. Judson! It wouldn't half make them look silly if the Honorable Frederick was sued for breach just now, with the wedding coming on!"

"There is no danger of that."

It was Joan's voice, and she had spoken with such decision that she had the ear of the table immediately. All eyes looked in her direction. Ashe was struck with her expression. Her eyes were shining as though she were angry; and there was a flush on her face. A phrase he had used in the train came back to him. She looked like a princess in disguise.

"What makes you say that, Miss Simpson?" inquired Judson, annoyed. He had been at pains to make the company's flesh creep, and it appeared to be Joan's aim to undo his work.

It seemed to Ashe that Joan made an effort of some sort as though she were pulling herself together and remembering where she was.

"Well," she said, almost lamely, "I don't think it at all likely that he proposed marriage to this girl."

"You never can tell," said Judson. "My impression is that Freddie did. It's my belief that there's something on his mind these days. Before he went to London with his lordship the other day he was behaving very strange. And since he came back it's my belief that he has been brooding. And I happen to know he followed the affair of Lord Stockheath pretty closely, for he clipped the clippings out of the paper. I found them myself one day when I happened to be going through his things."

Beach cleared his throat—his mode of indicating that he was about to monopolize the conversation.

"And in any case, Miss Simpson," he said solemnly, "with things come to the pass they have come to, and the juries—drawn from the lower classes—in the nasty mood they're in, it don't seem hardly necessary in these affairs for there to have been any definite promise of marriage. What with all this socialism rampant, they seem so happy at the idea of being able to do one of us an injury that they give heavy damages without it. A few ardent expressions,

and that's enough for them. You recollect the Havant case, and when young Lord Mount Anville was sued? What it comes to is that anarchy is getting the upper hand, and the lower classes are getting above themselves. It's all these here cheap newspapers that does it. They tempt the lower classes to get above themselves.

"Only this morning I had to speak severe to that young fellow, James, the footman. He was a good young fellow once and did his work well, and had a proper respect for people; but now he's gone all to pieces. And why? Because six months ago he had the rheumatism, and had the audacity to send his picture and a testimonial, saying that it had cured him of awful agonies, to Walkinshaw's Supreme Ointment, and they printed it in half a dozen papers; and it has been the ruin of James. He has got above himself and don't care for nobody."

"Well, all I can say is," resumed Judson, "that I hope to goodness nothing won't happen to Freddie of that kind; for it's not every girl that would have him."

There was a murmur of assent to this truth.

"Now your Miss Peters," said Judson tolerantly—"she seems a nice little thing."

"She would be pleased to hear you say so," said Joan.

"Joan Valentine!" cried Judson, bringing his hands down on the tablecloth with a bang. "I've just remembered it. That was the name of the girl Freddie used to write the letters and poems to; and that's who it is I've been trying all along to think you reminded me of, Miss Simpson. You're the living image of Freddie's Miss Joan Valentine."

Ashe was not normally a young man of particularly ready wit; but on this occasion it may have been that the shock of this revelation, added to the fact that something must be done speedily if Joan's

discomposure was not to become obvious to all present, quickened his intelligence. Joan, usually so sure of herself, so ready of resource, had gone temporarily to pieces. She was quite white, and her eyes met Ashe's with almost a hunted expression.

If the attention of the company was to be diverted, something drastic must be done. A mere verbal attempt to change the conversation would be useless. Inspiration descended on Ashe.

In the days of his childhood in Hayling, Massachusetts, he had played truant from Sunday school again and again in order to frequent the society of one Eddie Waffles, the official bad boy of the locality. It was not so much Eddie's charm of conversation which had attracted him—though that had been great—as the fact that Eddie, among his other accomplishments, could give a lifelike imitation of two cats fighting in a back yard; and Ashe felt that he could never be happy until he had acquired this gift from the master.

In course of time he had done so. It might be that his absences from Sunday school in the cause of art had left him in later years a trifle shaky on the subject of the Kings of Judah, but his hard-won accomplishment had made him in request at every smoking concert at Oxford; and it saved the situation now.

"Have you ever heard two cats fighting in a back yard?" he inquired casually of his neighbor, Miss Willoughby.

The next moment the performance was in full swing. Young Master Waffles, who had devoted considerable study to his subject, had conceived the combat of his imaginary cats in a broad, almost Homeric, vein. The unpleasantness opened with a low gurgling sound, answered by another a shade louder and possibly more querulous. A momentary silence was followed by a long-drawn note, like rising wind, cut off abruptly and succeeded by a grumbling mutter. The response to this was a couple of sharp

howls. Both parties to the contest then indulged in a discontented whining, growing louder and louder until the air was full of electric menace. And then, after another sharp silence, came war, noisy and overwhelming.

Standing at Master Waffles' side, you could follow almost every movement of that intricate fray, and mark how now one and now the other of the battlers gained a short-lived advantage. It was a great fight. Shrewd blows were taken and given, and in the eye of the imagination you could see the air thick with flying fur. Louder and louder grew the din; and then, at its height, it ceased in one crescendo of tumult, and all was still, save for a faint, angry moaning.

Such was the cat fight of Master Eddie Waffles; and Ashe, though falling short of the master, as a pupil must, rendered it faithfully and with energy.

To say that the attention of the company was diverted from Mr. Judson and his remarks by the extraordinary noises which proceeded from Ashe's lips would be to offer a mere shadowy suggestion of the sensation caused by his efforts. At first, stunned surprise, then consternation, greeted him. Beach, the butler, was staring as one watching a miracle, nearer apparently to apoplexy than ever. On the faces of the others every shade of emotion was to be seen.

That this should be happening in the steward's room at Blandings Castle was scarcely less amazing than if it had taken place in a cathedral. The upper servants, rigid in their seats, looked at each other, like Cortes' soldiers—"with a wild surmise."

The last faint moan of feline defiance died away and silence fell on the room. Ashe turned to Miss Willoughby.

"Just like that!" he said. "I was telling Miss Willoughby," he added apologetically to Mrs. Twemlow, "about the cats in London. They were a great trial."

For perhaps three seconds his social reputation swayed to and fro in the balance, while the company pondered on what he had done. It was new; but it was humorous—or was it vulgar? There is nothing the English upper servant so abhors as vulgarity. That was what the steward's room was trying to make up its mind about.

Then Miss Willoughby threw her shapely head back and the squeal of her laughter smote the ceiling. And at that the company made its decision. Everybody laughed. Everybody urged Ashe to give an encore. Everybody was his friend and admirer—everybody but Beach, the butler. Beach, the butler, was shocked to his very core. His heavy-lidded eyes rested on Ashe with disapproval. It seemed to Beach, the butler, that this young man Marson had got above himself.

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Ashe found Joan at his side. Dinner was over and the diners were making for the housekeeper's room.

"Thank you, Mr. Marson. That was very good of you and very clever." Her eyes twinkled. "But what a terrible chance you took! You have made yourself a popular success, but you might just as easily have become a social outcast. As it is, I am afraid Mr. Beach did not approve."

"I'm afraid he didn't. In a minute or so I'm going to fawn on him and make all well."

Joan lowered her voice.

"It was quite true, what that odious little man said. Freddie Threepwood did write me letters. Of course I destroyed them long ago."

"But weren't you running the risk in coming here that he might recognize you? Wouldn't that make it rather unpleasant for you?"

"I never met him, you see. He only wrote to me. When he came to the station to meet us this evening he looked startled to see me; so I suppose he remembers my appearance. But Aline will have told him that my name is Simpson."

"That fellow Judson said he was brooding. I think you ought to put him out of his misery."

"Mr. Judson must have been letting his imagination run away with him. He is out of his misery. He sent a horrid fat man named Jones to see me in London about the letters, and I told him I had destroyed them. He must have let him know that by this time."

"I see."

They went into the housekeeper's room. Mr. Beach was standing before the fire. Ashe went up to him. It was not an easy matter to mollify Mr. Beach. Ashe tried the most tempting topics. He mentioned swollen feet—he dangled the lining of Mr. Beach's stomach temptingly before his eyes; but the butler was not to be softened. Only when Ashe turned the conversation to the subject of the museum did a flicker of animation stir him.

Mr. Beach was fond and proud of the Blandings Castle museum. It had been the means of getting him into print for the first and only time in his life. A year before, a representative of the *Intelligencer* and *Echo*, from the neighboring town of Blatchford, had come to visit the castle on behalf of his paper; and he had begun one section of his article with the words: "Under the auspices of Mr.

Beach, my genial cicerone, I then visited his lordship's museum—" Mr. Beach treasured the clipping in a special writing-desk.

He responded almost amiably to Ashe's questions. Yes; he had seen the scarab—he pronounced it scayrub—which Mr. Peters had presented to his lordship. He understood that his lordship thought very highly of Mr. Peters' scayrub. He had overheard Mr. Baxter telling his lordship that it was extremely valuable.

"Mr. Beach," said Ashe, "I wonder whether you would take me to see Lord Emsworth's museum?"

Mr. Beach regarded him heavily.

"I shall be pleased to take you to see his lordship's museum," he replied.

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One can attribute only to the nervous mental condition following the interview he had had with Ashe in his bedroom the rash act Mr. Peters attempted shortly after dinner.

Mr. Peters, shortly after dinner, was in a dangerous and reckless mood. He had had a wretched time all through the meal. The Blandings chef had extended himself in honor of the house party, and had produced a succession of dishes, which in happier days Mr. Peters would have devoured eagerly. To be compelled by considerations of health to pass these by was enough to damp the liveliest optimist. Mr. Peters had suffered terribly. Occasions of feasting and revelry like the present were for him so many battlefields, on which greed fought with prudence.

All through dinner he brooded on Ashe's defiance and the horrors which were to result from that defiance. One of Mr. Peters' most painful memories was of a two weeks' visit he had once paid to Mr. Muldoon in his celebrated establishment at White Plains. He

had been persuaded to go there by a brother millionaire whom, until then, he had always regarded as a friend. The memory of Mr. Muldoon's cold shower baths and brisk system of physical exercise still lingered.

The thought that under Ashe's rule he was to go through privately very much what he had gone through in the company of a gang of other unfortunates at Muldoon's froze him with horror. He knew those health cranks who believed that all mortal ailments could be cured by cold showers and brisk walks. They were all alike and they nearly killed you. His worst nightmare was the one where he dreamed he was back at Muldoon's, leading his horse up that endless hill outside the village.

He would not stand it! He would be hanged if he'd stand it! He would defy Ashe. But if he defied Ashe, Ashe would go away; and then whom could he find to recover his lost scarab?

Mr. Peters began to appreciate the true meaning of the phrase about the horns of a dilemma. The horns of this dilemma occupied his attention until the end of the dinner. He shifted uneasily from one to the other and back again. He rose from the table in a thoroughly overwrought condition of mind. And then, somehow, in the course of the evening, he found himself alone in the hall, not a dozen feet from the unlocked museum door.

It was not immediately that he appreciated the significance of this fact. He had come to the hall because its solitude suited his mood. It was only after he had finished a cigar—Ashe could not stop his smoking after dinner—that it suddenly flashed on him that he had ready at hand a solution of all his troubles. A brief minute's resolute action and the scarab would be his again, and the menace of Ashe a thing of the past. He glanced about him. Yes; he was alone.

Not once since the removal of the scarab had begun to exercise his mind had Mr. Peters contemplated for an instant the possibility of recovering it himself. The prospect of the unpleasantness that would ensue had been enough to make him regard such an action as out of the question. The risk was too great to be considered for a moment; but here he was, in a position where the risk was negligible!

Like Ashe, he had always visualized the recovery of his scarab as a thing of the small hours, a daring act to be performed when sleep held the castle in its grip. That an opportunity would be presented to him of walking in quite calmly and walking out again with the Cheops in his pocket, had never occurred to him as a possibility.

Yet now this chance was presenting itself in all its simplicity, and all he had to do was to grasp it. The door of the museum was not even closed. He could see from where he stood that it was ajar.

He moved cautiously in its direction—not in a straight line as one going to a museum, but circuitously as one strolling without an aim. From time to time he glanced over his shoulder. He reached the door, hesitated, and passed it. He turned, reached the door again—and again passed it. He stood for a moment darting his eyes about the hall; then, in a burst of resolution, he dashed for the door and shot in like a rabbit.

At the same moment the Efficient Baxter, who, from the shelter of a pillar on the gallery that ran around two-thirds of the hall, had been eyeing the peculiar movements of the distinguished guest with considerable interest for some minutes, began to descend the stairs.

Rupert Baxter, the Earl of Emsworth's indefatigable private secretary, was one of those men whose chief characteristic is a vague suspicion of their fellow human beings. He did not suspect

them of this or that definite crime; he simply suspected them. He prowled through life as we are told the hosts of Midian prowled.

His powers in this respect were well-known at Blandings Castle. The Earl of Emsworth said: "Baxter is invaluable—positively invaluable." The Honorable Freddie said: "A chappie can't take a step in this bally house without stumbling over that damn feller, Baxter!" The manservant and the maidservant within the gates, like Miss Willoughby, employing that crisp gift for characterization which is the property of the English lower orders, described him as a Nosy Parker.

Peering over the railing of the balcony and observing the curious movements of Mr. Peters, who, as a matter of fact, while making up his mind to approach the door, had been backing and filling about the hall in a quaint serpentine manner like a man trying to invent a new variety of the tango, the Efficient Baxter had found himself in some way—why, he did not know—of what, he could not say—but in some nebulous way, suspicious.

He had not definitely accused Mr. Peters in his mind of any specific tort or malfeasance. He had merely felt that something fishy was toward. He had a sixth sense in such matters.

But when Mr. Peters, making up his mind, leaped into the museum,

Baxter's suspicions lost their vagueness and became crystallized. Certainty descended on him like a bolt from the skies. On oath, before a notary, the Efficient Baxter would have declared that J. Preston Peters was about to try to purloin the scarab.

Lest we should seem to be attributing too miraculous powers of intuition to Lord Emsworth's secretary, it should be explained that the mystery which hung about that curio had exercised his mind not a little since his employer had given it to him to place in the museum. He knew Lord Emsworth's power of forgetting and he

did not believe his account of the transaction. Scarab maniacs like Mr. Peters did not give away specimens from their collections as presents. But he had not divined the truth of what had happened in London.

The conclusion at which he had arrived was that Lord Emsworth had bought the scarab and had forgotten all about it. To support this theory was the fact that the latter had taken his check book to London with him. Baxter's long acquaintance with the earl had left him with the conviction that there was no saying what he might not do if left loose in London with a check book.

As to Mr. Peters' motive for entering the museum, that, too, seemed completely clear to the secretary. He was a curio enthusiast himself and he had served collectors in a secretarial capacity; and he knew, both from experience and observation, that strange madness which may at any moment afflict the collector, blotting out morality and the nice distinction between meum and tuum, as with a sponge. He knew that collectors who would not steal a loaf if they were starving might—and did—fall before the temptation of a coveted curio.

He descended the stairs three at a time, and entered the museum at the very instant when Mr. Peters' twitching fingers were about to close on his treasure. He handled the delicate situation with eminent tact. Mr. Peters, at the sound of his step, had executed a backward leap, which was as good as a confession of guilt, and his face was rigid with dismay; but the Efficient Baxter pretended not to notice these phenomena. His manner, when he spoke, was easy and unembarrassed.

"Ah! Taking a look at our little collection, Mr. Peters? You will see that we have given the place of honor to your Cheops. It is certainly a fine specimen—a wonderfully fine specimen."

Mr. Peters was recovering slowly. Baxter talked on, to give him time. He spoke of Mut and Bubastis, of Ammon and the Book of the Dead. He directed the other's attention to the Roman coins.

He was touching on some aspects of the Princess Gilukhipa of Mitanni, in whom his hearer could scarcely fail to be interested, when the door opened and Beach, the butler, came in, accompanied by Ashe. In the bustle of the interruption Mr. Peters escaped, glad to be elsewhere, and questioning for the first time in his life the dictum that if you want a thing well done you must do it yourself.

"I was not aware, sir," said Beach, the butler, "that you were in occupation of the museum. I would not have intruded; but this young man expressed a desire to examine the exhibits, and I took the liberty of conducting him."

"Come in, Beach—come in," said Baxter.

The light fell on Ashe's face, and he recognized him as the cheerful young man who had inquired the way to Mr. Peters' room before dinner and who, he had by this time discovered, was not the Honorable Freddie's friend, George Emerson—or, indeed, any other of the guests of the house. He felt suspicious.

"Oh, Beach!"

"Sir?"

"Just a moment."

He drew the butler into the hall, out of earshot.

"Beach, who is that man?"

"Mr. Peters' valet, sir."

"Mr. Peters' valet!"

"Yes, sir."

"Has he been in service long?" asked Baxter, remembering that a mere menial had addressed him as "old man."

Beach lowered his voice. He and the Efficient Baxter were old allies, and it seemed right to Beach to confide in him.

"He has only just joined Mr. Peters, sir; and he has never been in service before. He told me so himself, and I was unable to elicit from him any information as to his antecedents. His manner struck me, sir, as peculiar. It crossed my mind to wonder whether Mr. Peters happened to be aware of this. I should dislike to do any young man an injury; but it might be anyone coming to a gentleman without a character, like this young man. Mr. Peters might have been deceived, sir."

The Efficient Baxter's manner became distraught. His mind was working rapidly.

"Should he be informed, sir?"

"Eh! Who?"

"Mr. Peters, sir—in case he should have been deceived?"

"No, no; Mr. Peters knows his own business."

"Far from me be it to appear officious, sir; but—"

"Mr. Peters probably knows all about him. Tell me, Beach, who was it suggested this visit to the museum? Did you?"

"It was at the young man's express desire that I conducted him, sir."

The Efficient Baxter returned to the museum without a word. Ashe, standing in the middle of the room, was impressing the topography of the place on his memory. He was unaware of the

piercing stare of suspicion that was being directed at him from behind.

He did not see Baxter. He was not even thinking of Baxter; but Baxter was on the alert. Baxter was on the warpath. Baxter knew!