

CHAPTER VIII. THE ADVENTURES OF TOMMY

TAKEN aback though he was by the man's words, Tommy did not hesitate. If audacity had successfully carried him so far, it was to be hoped it would carry him yet farther. He quietly passed into the house and mounted the ramshackle staircase. Everything in the house was filthy beyond words. The grimy paper, of a pattern now indistinguishable, hung in loose festoons from the wall. In every angle was a grey mass of cobweb.

Tommy proceeded leisurely. By the time he reached the bend of the staircase, he had heard the man below disappear into a back room. Clearly no suspicion attached to him as yet. To come to the house and ask for "Mr. Brown" appeared indeed to be a reasonable and natural proceeding.

At the top of the stairs Tommy halted to consider his next move. In front of him ran a narrow passage, with doors opening on either side of it. From the one nearest him on the left came a low murmur of voices. It was this room which he had been directed to enter. But what held his glance fascinated was a small recess immediately on his right, half concealed by a torn velvet curtain. It was directly opposite the left-handed door and, owing to its angle, it also commanded a good view of the upper part of the staircase. As a hiding-place for one or, at a pinch, two men, it was ideal, being about two feet deep and three feet wide. It attracted Tommy mightily. He thought things over in his usual slow and steady way, deciding that the mention of "Mr. Brown" was not a request for an individual, but in all probability a password used by the gang. His lucky use of it had gained him admission. So far he had aroused no suspicion. But he must decide quickly on his next step.

Suppose he were boldly to enter the room on the left of the passage. Would the mere fact of his having been admitted to the house be sufficient? Perhaps a further password would be required, or, at any rate, some proof of identity. The doorkeeper clearly did not know all the members of the gang by sight, but it might be different upstairs. On the whole it seemed to him that luck had served him very well so far, but that there was such a thing as trusting it too far. To enter that room was a colossal risk. He could not hope to sustain his part indefinitely; sooner or later he was almost bound to betray himself, and then he would have thrown away a vital chance in mere foolhardiness.

A repetition of the signal knock sounded on the door below, and Tommy, his mind made up, slipped quickly into the recess, and cautiously drew the curtain

farther across so that it shielded him completely from sight. There were several rents and slits in the ancient material which afforded him a good view. He would watch events, and any time he chose could, after all, join the assembly, modelling his behaviour on that of the new arrival.

The man who came up the staircase with a furtive, soft-footed tread was quite unknown to Tommy. He was obviously of the very dregs of society. The low beetling brows, and the criminal jaw, the bestiality of the whole countenance were new to the young man, though he was a type that Scotland Yard would have recognized at a glance.

The man passed the recess, breathing heavily as he went. He stopped at the door opposite, and gave a repetition of the signal knock. A voice inside called out something, and the man opened the door and passed in, affording Tommy a momentary glimpse of the room inside. He thought there must be about four or five people seated round a long table that took up most of the space, but his attention was caught and held by a tall man with close-cropped hair and a short, pointed, naval-looking beard, who sat at the head of the table with papers in front of him. As the new-comer entered he glanced up, and with a correct, but curiously precise enunciation, which attracted Tommy's notice, he asked:

"Your number, comrade?"

"Fourteen, gov'nor," replied the other hoarsely.

"Correct."

The door shut again.

"If that isn't a Hun, I'm a Dutchman!" said Tommy to himself. "And running the show darned systematically too--as they always do. Lucky I didn't roll in. I'd have given the wrong number, and there would have been the deuce to pay. No, this is the place for me. Hullo, here's another knock."

This visitor proved to be of an entirely different type to the last. Tommy recognized in him an Irish Sinn Feiner. Certainly Mr. Brown's organization was a far-reaching concern. The common criminal, the well-bred Irish gentleman, the pale Russian, and the efficient German master of the ceremonies! Truly a strange and sinister gathering! Who was this man who held in his finger these curiously variegated links of an unknown chain?

In this case, the procedure was exactly the same. The signal knock, the demand

for a number, and the reply "Correct."

Two knocks followed in quick succession on the door below. The first man was quite unknown to Tommy, who put him down as a city clerk. A quiet, intelligent-looking man, rather shabbily dressed. The second was of the working classes, and his face was vaguely familiar to the young man.

Three minutes later came another, a man of commanding appearance, exquisitely dressed, and evidently well born. His face, again, was not unknown to the watcher, though he could not for the moment put a name to it.

After his arrival there was a long wait. In fact Tommy concluded that the gathering was now complete, and was just cautiously creeping out from his hiding-place, when another knock sent him scuttling back to cover.

This last-comer came up the stairs so quietly that he was almost abreast of Tommy before the young man had realized his presence.

He was a small man, very pale, with a gentle almost womanish air. The angle of the cheek-bones hinted at his Slavonic ancestry, otherwise there was nothing to indicate his nationality. As he passed the recess, he turned his head slowly. The strange light eyes seemed to burn through the curtain; Tommy could hardly believe that the man did not know he was there and in spite of himself he shivered. He was no more fanciful than the majority of young Englishmen, but he could not rid himself of the impression that some unusually potent force emanated from the man. The creature reminded him of a venomous snake.

A moment later his impression was proved correct. The new-comer knocked on the door as all had done, but his reception was very different. The bearded man rose to his feet, and all the others followed suit. The German came forward and shook hands. His heels clicked together.

"We are honoured," he said. "We are greatly honoured. I much feared that it would be impossible."

The other answered in a low voice that had a kind of hiss in it:

"There were difficulties. It will not be possible again, I fear. But one meeting is essential--to define my policy. I can do nothing without--Mr. Brown. He is here?"

The change in the German's voice was audible as he replied with slight hesitation:

"We have received a message. It is impossible for him to be present in person." He stopped, giving a curious impression of having left the sentence unfinished.

A very slow smile overspread the face of the other. He looked round at a circle of uneasy faces.

"Ah! I understand. I have read of his methods. He works in the dark and trusts no one. But, all the same, it is possible that he is among us now...." He looked round him again, and again that expression of fear swept over the group. Each man seemed eyeing his neighbour doubtfully.

The Russian tapped his cheek.

"So be it. Let us proceed."

The German seemed to pull himself together. He indicated the place he had been occupying at the head of the table. The Russian demurred, but the other insisted.

"It is the only possible place," he said, "for--Number One. Perhaps Number Fourteen will shut the door?"

In another moment Tommy was once more confronting bare wooden panels, and the voices within had sunk once more to a mere undistinguishable murmur. Tommy became restive. The conversation he had overheard had stimulated his curiosity. He felt that, by hook or by crook, he must hear more.

There was no sound from below, and it did not seem likely that the doorkeeper would come upstairs. After listening intently for a minute or two, he put his head round the curtain. The passage was deserted. Tommy bent down and removed his shoes, then, leaving them behind the curtain, he walked gingerly out on his stockinged feet, and kneeling down by the closed door he laid his ear cautiously to the crack. To his intense annoyance he could distinguish little more; just a chance word here and there if a voice was raised, which merely served to whet his curiosity still farther.

He eyed the handle of the door tentatively. Could he turn it by degrees so gently and imperceptibly that those in the room would notice nothing? He decided that with great care it could be done. Very slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time, he moved it round, holding his breath in his excessive care. A little more--a little more still--would it never be finished? Ah! at last it would turn no farther.

He stayed so for a minute or two, then drew a deep breath, and pressed it ever so

slightly inward. The door did not budge. Tommy was annoyed. If he had to use too much force, it would almost certainly creak. He waited until the voices rose a little, then he tried again. Still nothing happened. He increased the pressure. Had the beastly thing stuck? Finally, in desperation, he pushed with all his might. But the door remained firm, and at last the truth dawned upon him. It was locked or bolted on the inside.

For a moment or two Tommy's indignation got the better of him.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said. "What a dirty trick!"

As his indignation cooled, he prepared to face the situation. Clearly the first thing to be done was to restore the handle to its original position. If he let it go suddenly, the men inside would be almost certain to notice it, so, with the same infinite pains, he reversed his former tactics. All went well, and with a sigh of relief the young man rose to his feet. There was a certain bulldog tenacity about Tommy that made him slow to admit defeat. Checkmated for the moment, he was far from abandoning the conflict. He still intended to hear what was going on in the locked room. As one plan had failed, he must hunt about for another.

He looked round him. A little farther along the passage on the left was a second door. He slipped silently along to it. He listened for a moment or two, then tried the handle. It yielded, and he slipped inside.

The room, which was untenanted, was furnished as a bedroom. Like everything else in the house, the furniture was falling to pieces, and the dirt was, if anything, more abundant.

But what interested Tommy was the thing he had hoped to find, a communicating door between the two rooms, up on the left by the window. Carefully closing the door into the passage behind him, he stepped across to the other and examined it closely. The bolt was shot across it. It was very rusty, and had clearly not been used for some time. By gently wriggling it to and fro, Tommy managed to draw it back without making too much noise. Then he repeated his former manoeuvres with the handle--this time with complete success. The door swung open--a crack, a mere fraction, but enough for Tommy to hear what went on. There was a velvet portiere on the inside of this door which prevented him from seeing, but he was able to recognize the voices with a reasonable amount of accuracy.

The Sinn Feiner was speaking. His rich Irish voice was unmistakable:

"That's all very well. But more money is essential. No money--no results!"

Another voice which Tommy rather thought was that of Boris replied:

"Will you guarantee that there ARE results?"

"In a month from now--sooner or later as you wish--I will guarantee you such a reign of terror in Ireland as shall shake the British Empire to its foundations."

There was a pause, and then came the soft, sibilant accents of Number One:

"Good! You shall have the money. Boris, you will see to that."

Boris asked a question:

"Via the Irish Americans, and Mr. Potter as usual?"

"I guess that'll be all right!" said a new voice, with a transatlantic intonation, "though I'd like to point out, here and now, that things are getting a mite difficult. There's not the sympathy there was, and a growing disposition to let the Irish settle their own affairs without interference from America."

Tommy felt that Boris had shrugged his shoulders as he answered:

"Does that matter, since the money only nominally comes from the States?"

"The chief difficulty is the landing of the ammunition," said the Sinn Feiner. "The money is conveyed in easily enough--thanks to our colleague here."

Another voice, which Tommy fancied was that of the tall, commanding-looking man whose face had seemed familiar to him, said:

"Think of the feelings of Belfast if they could hear you!"

"That is settled, then," said the sibilant tones. "Now, in the matter of the loan to an English newspaper, you have arranged the details satisfactorily, Boris?"

"I think so."

"That is good. An official denial from Moscow will be forthcoming if necessary."

There was a pause, and then the clear voice of the German broke the silence:

"I am directed by--Mr. Brown, to place the summaries of the reports from the different unions before you. That of the miners is most satisfactory. We must hold back the railways. There may be trouble with the A.S.E."

For a long time there was a silence, broken only by the rustle of papers and an occasional word of explanation from the German. Then Tommy heard the light tap-tap of fingers, drumming on the table.

"And--the date, my friend?" said Number One.

"The 29th."

The Russian seemed to consider:

"That is rather soon."

"I know. But it was settled by the principal Labour leaders, and we cannot seem to interfere too much. They must believe it to be entirely their own show."

The Russian laughed softly, as though amused.

"Yes, yes," he said. "That is true. They must have no inkling that we are using them for our own ends. They are honest men--and that is their value to us. It is curious--but you cannot make a revolution without honest men. The instinct of the populace is infallible." He paused, and then repeated, as though the phrase pleased him: "Every revolution has had its honest men. They are soon disposed of afterwards."

There was a sinister note in his voice.

The German resumed:

"Clymes must go. He is too far-seeing. Number Fourteen will see to that."

There was a hoarse murmur.

"That's all right, gov'nor." And then after a moment or two: "Suppose I'm nabbed."

"You will have the best legal talent to defend you," replied the German quietly. "But in any case you will wear gloves fitted with the finger-prints of a notorious housebreaker. You have little to fear."

"Oh, I ain't afraid, gov'nor. All for the good of the cause. The streets is going to run with blood, so they say." He spoke with a grim relish. "Dreams of it, sometimes, I does. And diamonds and pearls rolling about in the gutter for anyone to pick up!"

Tommy heard a chair shifted. Then Number One spoke:

"Then all is arranged. We are assured of success?"

"I--think so." But the German spoke with less than his usual confidence.

Number One's voice held suddenly a dangerous quality:

"What has gone wrong?"

"Nothing; but----"

"But what?"

"The Labour leaders. Without them, as you say, we can do nothing. If they do not declare a general strike on the 29th----"

"Why should they not?"

"As you've said, they're honest. And, in spite of everything we've done to discredit the Government in their eyes, I'm not sure that they haven't got a sneaking faith and belief in it."

"But----"

"I know. They abuse it unceasingly. But, on the whole, public opinion swings to the side of the Government. They will not go against it."

Again the Russian's fingers drummed on the table.

"To the point, my friend. I was given to understand that there was a certain document in existence which assured success."

"That is so. If that document were placed before the leaders, the result would be immediate. They would publish it broadcast throughout England, and declare for the revolution without a moment's hesitation. The Government would be broken finally and completely."

"Then what more do you want?"

"The document itself," said the German bluntly.

"Ah! It is not in your possession? But you know where it is?"

"No."

"Does anyone know where it is?"

"One person--perhaps. And we are not sure of that even."

"Who is this person?"

"A girl."

Tommy held his breath.

"A girl?" The Russian's voice rose contemptuously. "And you have not made her speak? In Russia we have ways of making a girl talk."

"This case is different," said the German sullenly.

"How--different?" He paused a moment, then went on: "Where is the girl now?"

"The girl?"

"Yes."

"She is----"

But Tommy heard no more. A crashing blow descended on his head, and all was darkness.