

## **CHAPTER IX. TUPPENCE ENTERS DOMESTIC SERVICE**

WHEN Tommy set forth on the trail of the two men, it took all Tuppence's self-command to refrain from accompanying him. However, she contained herself as best she might, consoled by the reflection that her reasoning had been justified by events. The two men had undoubtedly come from the second floor flat, and that one slender thread of the name "Rita" had set the Young Adventurers once more upon the track of the abductors of Jane Finn.

The question was what to do next? Tuppence hated letting the grass grow under her feet. Tommy was amply employed, and debarred from joining him in the chase, the girl felt at a loose end. She retraced her steps to the entrance hall of the mansions. It was now tenanted by a small lift-boy, who was polishing brass fittings, and whistling the latest air with a good deal of vigour and a reasonable amount of accuracy.

He glanced round at Tuppence's entry. There was a certain amount of the gamin element in the girl, at all events she invariably got on well with small boys. A sympathetic bond seemed instantly to be formed. She reflected that an ally in the enemy's camp, so to speak, was not to be despised.

"Well, William," she remarked cheerfully, in the best approved hospital-early-morning style, "getting a good shine up?"

The boy grinned responsively.

"Albert, miss," he corrected.

"Albert be it," said Tuppence. She glanced mysteriously round the hall. The effect was purposely a broad one in case Albert should miss it. She leaned towards the boy and dropped her voice: "I want a word with you, Albert."

Albert ceased operations on the fittings and opened his mouth slightly.

"Look! Do you know what this is?" With a dramatic gesture she flung back the left side of her coat and exposed a small enamelled badge. It was extremely unlikely that Albert would have any knowledge of it--indeed, it would have been fatal for Tuppence's plans, since the badge in question was the device of a local training corps originated by the archdeacon in the early days of the war. Its presence in Tuppence's coat was due to the fact that she had used it for pinning in some

flowers a day or two before. But Tuppence had sharp eyes, and had noted the corner of a threepenny detective novel protruding from Albert's pocket, and the immediate enlargement of his eyes told her that her tactics were good, and that the fish would rise to the bait.

"American Detective Force!" she hissed.

Albert fell for it.

"Lord!" he murmured ecstatically.

Tuppence nodded at him with the air of one who has established a thorough understanding.

"Know who I'm after?" she inquired genially.

Albert, still round-eyed, demanded breathlessly:

"One of the flats?"

Tuppence nodded and jerked a thumb up the stairs.

"No. 20. Calls herself Vandemeyer. Vandemeyer! Ha! ha!"

Albert's hand stole to his pocket.

"A crook?" he queried eagerly.

"A crook? I should say so. Ready Rita they call her in the States."

"Ready Rita," repeated Albert deliriously. "Oh, ain't it just like the pictures!"

It was. Tuppence was a great frequenter of the kinema.

"Annie always said as how she was a bad lot," continued the boy.

"Who's Annie?" inquired Tuppence idly.

"'Ouse-parlourmaid. She's leaving to-day. Many's the time Annie's said to me: 'Mark my words, Albert, I wouldn't wonder if the police was to come after her one of these days.' Just like that. But she's a stunner to look at, ain't she?"

"She's some peach," allowed Tuppence carelessly. "Finds it useful in her lay-out, you bet. Has she been wearing any of the emeralds, by the way?"

"Emeralds? Them's the green stones, isn't they?"

Tuppence nodded.

"That's what we're after her for. You know old man Rysdale?"

Albert shook his head.

"Peter B. Rysdale, the oil king?"

"It seems sort of familiar to me."

"The sparklers belonged to him. Finest collection of emeralds in the world. Worth a million dollars!"

"Lumme!" came ecstatically from Albert. "It sounds more like the pictures every minute."

Tuppence smiled, gratified at the success of her efforts.

"We haven't exactly proved it yet. But we're after her. And"--she produced a long-drawn-out wink--"I guess she won't get away with the goods this time."

Albert uttered another ejaculation indicative of delight.

"Mind you, sonny, not a word of this," said Tuppence suddenly. "I guess I oughtn't to have put you wise, but in the States we know a real smart lad when we see one."

"I'll not breathe a word," protested Albert eagerly. "Ain't there anything I could do? A bit of shadowing, maybe, or such like?"

Tuppence affected to consider, then shook her head.

"Not at the moment, but I'll bear you in mind, son. What's this about the girl you say is leaving?"

"Annie? Regular turn up, they 'ad. As Annie said, servants is some one nowadays, and to be treated accordingly, and, what with her passing the word round, she

won't find it so easy to get another."

"Won't she?" said Tuppence thoughtfully. "I wonder----"

An idea was dawning in her brain. She thought a minute or two, then tapped Albert on the shoulder.

"See here, son, my brain's got busy. How would it be if you mentioned that you'd got a young cousin, or a friend of yours had, that might suit the place. You get me?"

"I'm there," said Albert instantly. "You leave it to me, miss, and I'll fix the whole thing up in two ticks."

"Some lad!" commented Tuppence, with a nod of approval. "You might say that the young woman could come in right away. You let me know, and if it's O.K. I'll be round to-morrow at eleven o'clock."

"Where am I to let you know to?"

"Ritz," replied Tuppence laconically. "Name of Cowley."

Albert eyed her enviously.

"It must be a good job, this tec business."

"It sure is," drawled Tuppence, "especially when old man Rysdale backs the bill. But don't fret, son. If this goes well, you shall come in on the ground floor."

With which promise she took leave of her new ally, and walked briskly away from South Audley Mansions, well pleased with her morning's work.

But there was no time to be lost. She went straight back to the Ritz and wrote a few brief words to Mr. Carter. Having dispatched this, and Tommy not having yet returned--which did not surprise her--she started off on a shopping expedition which, with an interval for tea and assorted creamy cakes, occupied her until well after six o'clock, and she returned to the hotel jaded, but satisfied with her purchases. Starting with a cheap clothing store, and passing through one or two second-hand establishments, she had finished the day at a well-known hairdresser's. Now, in the seclusion of her bedroom, she unwrapped that final purchase. Five minutes later she smiled contentedly at her reflection in the glass. With an actress's pencil she had slightly altered the line of her eyebrows, and

that, taken in conjunction with the new luxuriant growth of fair hair above, so changed her appearance that she felt confident that even if she came face to face with Whittington he would not recognize her. She would wear elevators in her shoes, and the cap and apron would be an even more valuable disguise. From hospital experience she knew only too well that a nurse out of uniform is frequently unrecognized by her patients.

"Yes," said Tuppence aloud, nodding at the pert reflection in the glass, "you'll do." She then resumed her normal appearance.

Dinner was a solitary meal. Tuppence was rather surprised at Tommy's non-return. Julius, too, was absent--but that to the girl's mind was more easily explained. His "hustling" activities were not confined to London, and his abrupt appearances and disappearances were fully accepted by the Young Adventurers as part of the day's work. It was quite on the cards that Julius P. Hersheimer had left for Constantinople at a moment's notice if he fancied that a clue to his cousin's disappearance was to be found there. The energetic young man had succeeded in making the lives of several Scotland Yard men unbearable to them, and the telephone girls at the Admiralty had learned to know and dread the familiar "Hullo!" He had spent three hours in Paris hustling the Prefecture, and had returned from there imbued with the idea, possibly inspired by a weary French official, that the true clue to the mystery was to be found in Ireland.

"I dare say he's dashed off there now," thought Tuppence. "All very well, but this is very dull for ME! Here I am bursting with news, and absolutely no one to tell it to! Tommy might have wired, or something. I wonder where he is. Anyway, he can't have 'lost the trail' as they say. That reminds me----" And Miss Cowley broke off in her meditations, and summoned a small boy.

Ten minutes later the lady was ensconced comfortably on her bed, smoking cigarettes and deep in the perusal of Garnaby Williams, the Boy Detective, which, with other threepenny works of lurid fiction, she had sent out to purchase. She felt, and rightly, that before the strain of attempting further intercourse with Albert, it would be as well to fortify herself with a good supply of local colour.

The morning brought a note from Mr. Carter:

"DEAR MISS TUPPENCE,

"You have made a splendid start, and I congratulate you. I feel, though, that I should like to point out to you once more the risks you are running, especially if you pursue the course you indicate. Those people are absolutely desperate and

incapable of either mercy or pity. I feel that you probably underestimate the danger, and therefore warn you again that I can promise you no protection. You have given us valuable information, and if you choose to withdraw now no one could blame you. At any rate, think the matter over well before you decide.

"If, in spite of my warnings, you make up your mind to go through with it, you will find everything arranged. You have lived for two years with Miss Dufferin, The Parsonage, Llanelly, and Mrs. Vandemeyer can apply to her for a reference.

"May I be permitted a word or two of advice? Stick as near to the truth as possible--it minimizes the danger of 'slips.' I suggest that you should represent yourself to be what you are, a former V.A.D., who has chosen domestic service as a profession. There are many such at the present time. That explains away any incongruities of voice or manner which otherwise might awaken suspicion.

"Whichever way you decide, good luck to you.

"Your sincere friend,

"MR. CARTER."

Tuppence's spirits rose mercurially. Mr. Carter's warnings passed unheeded. The young lady had far too much confidence in herself to pay any heed to them.

With some reluctance she abandoned the interesting part she had sketched out for herself. Although she had no doubts of her own powers to sustain a role indefinitely, she had too much common sense not to recognize the force of Mr. Carter's arguments.

There was still no word or message from Tommy, but the morning post brought a somewhat dirty postcard with the words: "It's O.K." scrawled upon it.

At ten-thirty Tuppence surveyed with pride a slightly battered tin trunk containing her new possessions. It was artistically corded. It was with a slight blush that she rang the bell and ordered it to be placed in a taxi. She drove to Paddington, and left the box in the cloak room. She then repaired with a handbag to the fastnesses of the ladies' waiting-room. Ten minutes later a metamorphosed Tuppence walked demurely out of the station and entered a bus.

It was a few minutes past eleven when Tuppence again entered the hall of South Audley Mansions. Albert was on the look-out, attending to his duties in a somewhat desultory fashion. He did not immediately recognize Tuppence. When

he did, his admiration was unbounded.

"Blest if I'd have known you! That rig-out's top-hole."

"Glad you like it, Albert," replied Tuppence modestly. "By the way, am I your cousin, or am I not?"

"Your voice too," cried the delighted boy. "It's as English as anything! No, I said as a friend of mine knew a young gal. Annie wasn't best pleased. She's stopped on till to-day--to oblige, SHE said, but really it's so as to put you against the place."

"Nice girl," said Tuppence.

Albert suspected no irony.

"She's style about her, and keeps her silver a treat--but, my word, ain't she got a temper. Are you going up now, miss? Step inside the lift. No. 20 did you say?" And he winked.

Tuppence quelled him with a stern glance, and stepped inside.

As she rang the bell of No. 20 she was conscious of Albert's eyes slowly descending beneath the level of the floor.

A smart young woman opened the door.

"I've come about the place," said Tuppence.

"It's a rotten place," said the young woman without hesitation. "Regular old cat--always interfering. Accused me of tampering with her letters. Me! The flap was half undone anyway. There's never anything in the waste-paper basket--she burns everything. She's a wrong 'un, that's what she is. Swell clothes, but no class. Cook knows something about her--but she won't tell--scared to death of her. And suspicious! She's on to you in a minute if you as much as speak to a fellow. I can tell you----"

But what more Annie could tell, Tuppence was never destined to learn, for at that moment a clear voice with a peculiarly steely ring to it called:

"Annie!"

The smart young woman jumped as if she had been shot.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who are you talking to?"

"It's a young woman about the situation, ma'am."

"Show her in then. At once."

"Yes, ma'am."

Tuppence was ushered into a room on the right of the long passage. A woman was standing by the fireplace. She was no longer in her first youth, and the beauty she undeniably possessed was hardened and coarsened. In her youth she must have been dazzling. Her pale gold hair, owing a slight assistance to art, was coiled low on her neck, her eyes, of a piercing electric blue, seemed to possess a faculty of boring into the very soul of the person she was looking at. Her exquisite figure was enhanced by a wonderful gown of indigo charmeuse. And yet, despite her swaying grace, and the almost ethereal beauty of her face, you felt instinctively the presence of something hard and menacing, a kind of metallic strength that found expression in the tones of her voice and in that gimlet-like quality of her eyes.

For the first time Tuppence felt afraid. She had not feared Whittington, but this woman was different. As if fascinated, she watched the long cruel line of the red curving mouth, and again she felt that sensation of panic pass over her. Her usual self-confidence deserted her. Vaguely she felt that deceiving this woman would be very different to deceiving Whittington. Mr. Carter's warning recurred to her mind. Here, indeed, she might expect no mercy.

Fighting down that instinct of panic which urged her to turn tail and run without further delay, Tuppence returned the lady's gaze firmly and respectfully.

As though that first scrutiny had been satisfactory, Mrs. Vandemeyer motioned to a chair.

"You can sit down. How did you hear I wanted a house-parlourmaid?"

"Through a friend who knows the lift boy here. He thought the place might suit me."

Again that basilisk glance seemed to pierce her through.



"You speak like an educated girl?"

Glibly enough, Tuppence ran through her imaginary career on the lines suggested by Mr. Carter. It seemed to her, as she did so, that the tension of Mrs. Vandemeyer's attitude relaxed.

"I see," she remarked at length. "Is there anyone I can write to for a reference?"

"I lived last with a Miss Dufferin, The Parsonage, Llanelly. I was with her two years."

"And then you thought you would get more money by coming to London, I suppose? Well, it doesn't matter to me. I will give you L50--L60--whatever you want. You can come in at once?"

"Yes, ma'am. To-day, if you like. My box is at Paddington."

"Go and fetch it in a taxi, then. It's an easy place. I am out a good deal. By the way, what's your name?"

"Prudence Cooper, ma'am."

"Very well, Prudence. Go away and fetch your box. I shall be out to lunch. The cook will show you where everything is."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Tuppence withdrew. The smart Annie was not in evidence. In the hall below a magnificent hall porter had relegated Albert to the background. Tuppence did not even glance at him as she passed meekly out.

The adventure had begun, but she felt less elated than she had done earlier in the morning. It crossed her mind that if the unknown Jane Finn had fallen into the hands of Mrs. Vandemeyer, it was likely to have gone hard with her.