

CHAPTER X. ENTER SIR JAMES PEEL EDGERTON

TUPPENCE betrayed no awkwardness in her new duties. The daughters of the archdeacon were well grounded in household tasks. They were also experts in training a "raw girl," the inevitable result being that the raw girl, once trained, departed elsewhere where her newly acquired knowledge commanded a more substantial remuneration than the archdeacon's meagre purse allowed.

Tuppence had therefore very little fear of proving inefficient. Mrs. Vandemeyer's cook puzzled her. She evidently went in deadly terror of her mistress. The girl thought it probable that the other woman had some hold over her. For the rest, she cooked like a chef, as Tuppence had an opportunity of judging that evening. Mrs. Vandemeyer was expecting a guest to dinner, and Tuppence accordingly laid the beautifully polished table for two. She was a little exercised in her own mind as to this visitor. It was highly possible that it might prove to be Whittington. Although she felt fairly confident that he would not recognize her, yet she would have been better pleased had the guest proved to be a total stranger. However, there was nothing for it but to hope for the best.

At a few minutes past eight the front door bell rang, and Tuppence went to answer it with some inward trepidation. She was relieved to see that the visitor was the second of the two men whom Tommy had taken upon himself to follow.

He gave his name as Count Stepanov. Tuppence announced him, and Mrs. Vandemeyer rose from her seat on a low divan with a quick murmur of pleasure.

"It is delightful to see you, Boris Ivanovitch," she said.

"And you, madame!" He bowed low over her hand.

Tuppence returned to the kitchen.

"Count Stepanov, or some such," she remarked, and affecting a frank and unvarnished curiosity: "Who's he?"

"A Russian gentleman, I believe."

"Come here much?"

"Once in a while. What d'you want to know for?"

"Fancied he might be sweet on the missus, that's all," explained the girl, adding with an appearance of sulkiness: "How you do take one up!"

"I'm not quite easy in my mind about the soufflé," explained the other.

"You know something," thought Tuppence to herself, but aloud she only said: "Going to dish up now? Right-o."

Whilst waiting at table, Tuppence listened closely to all that was said. She remembered that this was one of the men Tommy was shadowing when she had last seen him. Already, although she would hardly admit it, she was becoming uneasy about her partner. Where was he? Why had no word of any kind come from him? She had arranged before leaving the Ritz to have all letters or messages sent on at once by special messenger to a small stationer's shop near at hand where Albert was to call in frequently. True, it was only yesterday morning that she had parted from Tommy, and she told herself that any anxiety on his behalf would be absurd. Still, it was strange that he had sent no word of any kind.

But, listen as she might, the conversation presented no clue. Boris and Mrs. Vandemeyer talked on purely indifferent subjects: plays they had seen, new dances, and the latest society gossip. After dinner they repaired to the small boudoir where Mrs. Vandemeyer, stretched on the divan, looked more wickedly beautiful than ever. Tuppence brought in the coffee and liqueurs and unwillingly retired. As she did so, she heard Boris say:

"New, isn't she?"

"She came in to-day. The other was a fiend. This girl seems all right. She waits well."

Tuppence lingered a moment longer by the door which she had carefully neglected to close, and heard him say:

"Quite safe, I suppose?"

"Really, Boris, you are absurdly suspicious. I believe she's the cousin of the hall porter, or something of the kind. And nobody even dreams that I have any connection with our--mutual friend, Mr. Brown."

"For heaven's sake, be careful, Rita. That door isn't shut."

"Well, shut it then," laughed the woman.

Tuppence removed herself speedily.

She dared not absent herself longer from the back premises, but she cleared away and washed up with a breathless speed acquired in hospital. Then she slipped quietly back to the boudoir door. The cook, more leisurely, was still busy in the kitchen and, if she missed the other, would only suppose her to be turning down the beds.

Alas! The conversation inside was being carried on in too low a tone to permit of her hearing anything of it. She dared not reopen the door, however gently. Mrs. Vandemeyer was sitting almost facing it, and Tuppence respected her mistress's lynx-eyed powers of observation.

Nevertheless, she felt she would give a good deal to overhear what was going on. Possibly, if anything unforeseen had happened, she might get news of Tommy. For some moments she reflected desperately, then her face brightened. She went quickly along the passage to Mrs. Vandemeyer's bedroom, which had long French windows leading on to a balcony that ran the length of the flat. Slipping quickly through the window, Tuppence crept noiselessly along till she reached the boudoir window. As she had thought it stood a little ajar, and the voices within were plainly audible.

Tuppence listened attentively, but there was no mention of anything that could be twisted to apply to Tommy. Mrs. Vandemeyer and the Russian seemed to be at variance over some matter, and finally the latter exclaimed bitterly:

"With your persistent recklessness, you will end by ruining us!"

"Bah!" laughed the woman. "Notoriety of the right kind is the best way of disarming suspicion. You will realize that one of these days--perhaps sooner than you think!"

"In the meantime, you are going about everywhere with Peel Edgerton. Not only is he, perhaps, the most celebrated K.C. in England, but his special hobby is criminology! It is madness!"

"I know that his eloquence has saved untold men from the gallows," said Mrs. Vandemeyer calmly. "What of it? I may need his assistance in that line myself some day. If so, how fortunate to have such a friend at court--or perhaps it would

be more to the point to say IN court."

Boris got up and began striding up and down. He was very excited.

"You are a clever woman, Rita; but you are also a fool! Be guided by me, and give up Peel Edgerton."

Mrs. Vandemeyer shook her head gently.

"I think not."

"You refuse?" There was an ugly ring in the Russian's voice.

"I do."

"Then, by Heaven," snarled the Russian, "we will see----" But Mrs. Vandemeyer also rose to her feet, her eyes flashing.

"You forget, Boris," she said. "I am accountable to no one. I take my orders only from--Mr. Brown."

The other threw up his hands in despair.

"You are impossible," he muttered. "Impossible! Already it may be too late. They say Peel Edgerton can SMELL a criminal! How do we know what is at the bottom of his sudden interest in you? Perhaps even now his suspicions are aroused. He guesses----"

Mrs. Vandemeyer eyed him scornfully.

"Reassure yourself, my dear Boris. He suspects nothing. With less than your usual chivalry, you seem to forget that I am commonly accounted a beautiful woman. I assure you that is all that interests Peel Edgerton."

Boris shook his head doubtfully.

"He has studied crime as no other man in this kingdom has studied it. Do you fancy that you can deceive him?"

Mrs. Vandemeyer's eyes narrowed.

"If he is all that you say--it would amuse me to try!"

"Good heavens, Rita----"

"Besides," added Mrs. Vandemeyer, "he is extremely rich. I am not one who despises money. The 'sinews of war,' you know, Boris!"

"Money--money! That is always the danger with you, Rita. I believe you would sell your soul for money. I believe----" He paused, then in a low, sinister voice he said slowly: "Sometimes I believe that you would sell--us!"

Mrs. Vandemeyer smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"The price, at any rate, would have to be enormous," she said lightly. "It would be beyond the power of anyone but a millionaire to pay."

"Ah!" snarled the Russian. "You see, I was right!"

"My dear Boris, can you not take a joke?"

"Was it a joke?"

"Of course."

"Then all I can say is that your ideas of humour are peculiar, my dear Rita."

Mrs. Vandemeyer smiled.

"Let us not quarrel, Boris. Touch the bell. We will have some drinks."

Tuppence beat a hasty retreat. She paused a moment to survey herself in Mrs. Vandemeyer's long glass, and be sure that nothing was amiss with her appearance. Then she answered the bell demurely.

The conversation that she had overheard, although interesting in that it proved beyond doubt the complicity of both Rita and Boris, threw very little light on the present preoccupations. The name of Jane Finn had not even been mentioned.

The following morning a few brief words with Albert informed her that nothing was waiting for her at the stationer's. It seemed incredible that Tommy, if all was well with him, should not send any word to her. A cold hand seemed to close round her heart.... Supposing... She choked her fears down bravely. It was no good worrying. But she leapt at a chance offered her by Mrs. Vandemeyer.

"What day do you usually go out, Prudence?"

"Friday's my usual day, ma'am."

Mrs. Vandemeyer lifted her eyebrows.

"And to-day is Friday! But I suppose you hardly wish to go out to-day, as you only came yesterday."

"I was thinking of asking you if I might, ma'am."

Mrs. Vandemeyer looked at her a minute longer, and then smiled.

"I wish Count Stepanov could hear you. He made a suggestion about you last night." Her smile broadened, catlike. "Your request is very--typical. I am satisfied. You do not understand all this--but you can go out to-day. It makes no difference to me, as I shall not be dining at home."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Tuppence felt a sensation of relief once she was out of the other's presence. Once again she admitted to herself that she was afraid, horribly afraid, of the beautiful woman with the cruel eyes.

In the midst of a final desultory polishing of her silver, Tuppence was disturbed by the ringing of the front door bell, and went to answer it. This time the visitor was neither Whittington nor Boris, but a man of striking appearance.

Just a shade over average height, he nevertheless conveyed the impression of a big man. His face, clean-shaven and exquisitely mobile, was stamped with an expression of power and force far beyond the ordinary. Magnetism seemed to radiate from him.

Tuppence was undecided for the moment whether to put him down as an actor or a lawyer, but her doubts were soon solved as he gave her his name: Sir James Peel Edgerton.

She looked at him with renewed interest. This, then, was the famous K.C. whose name was familiar all over England. She had heard it said that he might one day be Prime Minister. He was known to have refused office in the interests of his profession, preferring to remain a simple Member for a Scotch constituency.

Tuppence went back to her pantry thoughtfully. The great man had impressed her. She understood Boris's agitation. Peel Edgerton would not be an easy man to deceive.

In about a quarter of an hour the bell rang, and Tuppence repaired to the hall to show the visitor out. He had given her a piercing glance before. Now, as she handed him his hat and stick, she was conscious of his eyes raking her through. As she opened the door and stood aside to let him pass out, he stopped in the doorway.

"Not been doing this long, eh?"

Tuppence raised her eyes, astonished. She read in his glance kindness, and something else more difficult to fathom.

He nodded as though she had answered.

"V.A.D. and hard up, I suppose?"

"Did Mrs. Vandemeyer tell you that?" asked Tuppence suspiciously.

"No, child. The look of you told me. Good place here?"

"Very good, thank you, sir."

"Ah, but there are plenty of good places nowadays. And a change does no harm sometimes."

"Do you mean----?" began Tuppence.

But Sir James was already on the topmost stair. He looked back with his kindly, shrewd glance.

"Just a hint," he said. "That's all."

Tuppence went back to the pantry more thoughtful than ever.