

CHAPTER XIV. A CONSULTATION

NOTHING was more surprising and bewildering to Tuppence than the ease and simplicity with which everything was arranged, owing to Sir James's skilful handling. The doctor accepted quite readily the theory that Mrs. Vandemeyer had accidentally taken an overdose of chloral. He doubted whether an inquest would be necessary. If so, he would let Sir James know. He understood that Mrs. Vandemeyer was on the eve of departure for abroad, and that the servants had already left? Sir James and his young friends had been paying a call upon her, when she was suddenly stricken down and they had spent the night in the flat, not liking to leave her alone. Did they know of any relatives? They did not, but Sir James referred him to Mrs. Vandemeyer's solicitor.

Shortly afterwards a nurse arrived to take charge, and the other left the ill-omened building.

"And what now?" asked Julius, with a gesture of despair. "I guess we're down and out for good."

Sir James stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"No," he said quietly. "There is still the chance that Dr. Hall may be able to tell us something."

"Gee! I'd forgotten him."

"The chance is slight, but it must not be neglected. I think I told you that he is staying at the Metropole. I should suggest that we call upon him there as soon as possible. Shall we say after a bath and breakfast?"

It was arranged that Tuppence and Julius should return to the Ritz, and call for Sir James in the car. This programme was faithfully carried out, and a little after eleven they drew up before the Metropole. They asked for Dr. Hall, and a page-boy went in search of him. In a few minutes the little doctor came hurrying towards them.

"Can you spare us a few minutes, Dr. Hall?" said Sir James pleasantly. "Let me introduce you to Miss Cowley. Mr. Hersheimer, I think, you already know."

A quizzical gleam came into the doctor's eye as he shook hands with Julius.

"Ah, yes, my young friend of the tree episode! Ankle all right, eh?"

"I guess it's cured owing to your skilful treatment, doc."

"And the heart trouble? Ha ha!"

"Still searching," said Julius briefly.

"To come to the point, can we have a word with you in private?" asked Sir James.

"Certainly. I think there is a room here where we shall be quite undisturbed."

He led the way, and the others followed him. They sat down, and the doctor looked inquiringly at Sir James.

"Dr. Hall, I am very anxious to find a certain young lady for the purpose of obtaining a statement from her. I have reason to believe that she has been at one time or another in your establishment at Bournemouth. I hope I am transgressing no professional etiquette in questioning you on the subject?"

"I suppose it is a matter of testimony?"

Sir James hesitated a moment, then he replied:

"Yes."

"I shall be pleased to give you any information in my power. What is the young lady's name? Mr. Hersheimer asked me, I remember----" He half turned to Julius.

"The name," said Sir James bluntly, "is really immaterial. She would be almost certainly sent to you under an assumed one. But I should like to know if you are acquainted with a Mrs. Vandemeyer?"

"Mrs. Vandemeyer, of 20 South Audley Mansions? I know her slightly."

"You are not aware of what has happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"You do not know that Mrs. Vandemeyer is dead?"

"Dear, dear, I had no idea of it! When did it happen?"

"She took an overdose of chloral last night."

"Purposely?"

"Accidentally, it is believed. I should not like to say myself. Anyway, she was found dead this morning."

"Very sad. A singularly handsome woman. I presume she was a friend of yours, since you are acquainted with all these details."

"I am acquainted with the details because--well, it was I who found her dead."

"Indeed," said the doctor, starting.

"Yes," said Sir James, and stroked his chin reflectively.

"This is very sad news, but you will excuse me if I say that I do not see how it bears on the subject of your inquiry?"

"It bears on it in this way, is it not a fact that Mrs. Vandemeyer committed a young relative of hers to your charge?"

Julius leaned forward eagerly.

"That is the case," said the doctor quietly.

"Under the name of----?"

"Janet Vandemeyer. I understood her to be a niece of Mrs. Vandemeyer's."

"And she came to you?"

"As far as I can remember in June or July of 1915."

"Was she a mental case?"

"She is perfectly sane, if that is what you mean. I understood from Mrs. Vandemeyer that the girl had been with her on the Lusitania when that ill-fated ship was sunk, and had suffered a severe shock in consequence."

"We're on the right track, I think?" Sir James looked round.

"As I said before, I'm a mutt!" returned Julius.

The doctor looked at them all curiously.

"You spoke of wanting a statement from her," he said. "Supposing she is not able to give one?"

"What? You have just said that she is perfectly sane."

"So she is. Nevertheless, if you want a statement from her concerning any events prior to May 7, 1915, she will not be able to give it to you."

They looked at the little man, stupefied. He nodded cheerfully.

"It's a pity," he said. "A great pity, especially as I gather, Sir James, that the matter is important. But there it is, she can tell you nothing."

"But why, man? Darn it all, why?"

The little man shifted his benevolent glance to the excited young American.

"Because Janet Vandemeyer is suffering from a complete loss of memory."

"WHAT?"

"Quite so. An interesting case, a very interesting case. Not so uncommon, really, as you would think. There are several very well known parallels. It's the first case of the kind that I've had under my own personal observation, and I must admit that I've found it of absorbing interest." There was something rather ghoulish in the little man's satisfaction.

"And she remembers nothing," said Sir James slowly.

"Nothing prior to May 7, 1915. After that date her memory is as good as yours or mine."

"Then the first thing she remembers?"

"Is landing with the survivors. Everything before that is a blank. She did not

know her own name, or where she had come from, or where she was. She couldn't even speak her own tongue."

"But surely all this is most unusual?" put in Julius.

"No, my dear sir. Quite normal under the circumstances. Severe shock to the nervous system. Loss of memory proceeds nearly always on the same lines. I suggested a specialist, of course. There's a very good man in Paris--makes a study of these cases--but Mrs. Vandemeyer opposed the idea of publicity that might result from such a course."

"I can imagine she would," said Sir James grimly.

"I fell in with her views. There is a certain notoriety given to these cases. And the girl was very young--nineteen, I believe. It seemed a pity that her infirmity should be talked about--might damage her prospects. Besides, there is no special treatment to pursue in such cases. It is really a matter of waiting."

"Waiting?"

"Yes, sooner or later, the memory will return--as suddenly as it went. But in all probability the girl will have entirely forgotten the intervening period, and will take up life where she left off--at the sinking of the Lusitania."

"And when do you expect this to happen?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, that I cannot say. Sometimes it is a matter of months, sometimes it has been known to be as long as twenty years! Sometimes another shock does the trick. One restores what the other took away."

"Another shock, eh?" said Julius thoughtfully.

"Exactly. There was a case in Colorado----" The little man's voice trailed on, voluble, mildly enthusiastic.

Julius did not seem to be listening. He had relapsed into his own thoughts and was frowning. Suddenly he came out of his brown study, and hit the table such a resounding bang with his fist that every one jumped, the doctor most of all.

"I've got it! I guess, doc, I'd like your medical opinion on the plan I'm about to

outline. Say Jane was to cross the herring pond again, and the same thing was to happen. The submarine, the sinking ship, every one to take to the boats--and so on. Wouldn't that do the trick? Wouldn't it give a mighty big bump to her subconscious self, or whatever the jargon is, and start it functioning again right away?"

"A very interesting speculation, Mr. Hersheimmer. In my own opinion, it would be successful. It is unfortunate that there is no chance of the conditions repeating themselves as you suggest."

"Not by nature, perhaps, doc. But I'm talking about art."

"Art?"

"Why, yes. What's the difficulty? Hire a liner----"

"A liner!" murmured Dr. Hall faintly.

"Hire some passengers, hire a submarine--that's the only difficulty, I guess. Governments are apt to be a bit hidebound over their engines of war. They won't sell to the firstcomer. Still, I guess that can be got over. Ever heard of the word 'graft,' sir? Well, graft gets there every time! I reckon that we shan't really need to fire a torpedo. If every one hustles round and screams loud enough that the ship is sinking, it ought to be enough for an innocent young girl like Jane. By the time she's got a life-belt on her, and is being hustled into a boat, with a well-drilled lot of artistes doing the hysterical stunt on deck, why--she ought to be right back where she was in May, 1915. How's that for the bare outline?"

Dr. Hall looked at Julius. Everything that he was for the moment incapable of saying was eloquent in that look.

"No," said Julius, in answer to it, "I'm not crazy. The thing's perfectly possible. It's done every day in the States for the movies. Haven't you seen trains in collision on the screen? What's the difference between buying up a train and buying up a liner? Get the properties and you can go right ahead!"

Dr. Hall found his voice.

"But the expense, my dear sir." His voice rose. "The expense! It will be COLOSSAL!"

"Money doesn't worry me any," explained Julius simply.

Dr. Hall turned an appealing face to Sir James, who smiled slightly.

"Mr. Hersheimer is very well off--very well off indeed."

The doctor's glance came back to Julius with a new and subtle quality in it. This was no longer an eccentric young fellow with a habit of falling off trees. The doctor's eyes held the deference accorded to a really rich man.

"Very remarkable plan. Very remarkable," he murmured. "The movies--of course! Your American word for the kinema. Very interesting. I fear we are perhaps a little behind the times over here in our methods. And you really mean to carry out this remarkable plan of yours."

"You bet your bottom dollar I do."

The doctor believed him--which was a tribute to his nationality. If an Englishman had suggested such a thing, he would have had grave doubts as to his sanity.

"I cannot guarantee a cure," he pointed out. "Perhaps I ought to make that quite clear."

"Sure, that's all right," said Julius. "You just trot out Jane, and leave the rest to me."

"Jane?"

"Miss Janet Vandemeyer, then. Can we get on the long distance to your place right away, and ask them to send her up; or shall I run down and fetch her in my car?"

The doctor stared.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Hersheimer. I thought you understood."

"Understood what?"

"That Miss Vandemeyer is no longer under my care."