

CHAPTER XV. TUPPENCE RECEIVES A PROPOSAL

JULIUS sprang up.

"What?"

"I thought you were aware of that."

"When did she leave?"

"Let me see. To-day is Monday, is it not? It must have been last Wednesday--why, surely--yes, it was the same evening that you--er--fell out of my tree."

"That evening? Before, or after?"

"Let me see--oh yes, afterwards. A very urgent message arrived from Mrs. Vandemeyer. The young lady and the nurse who was in charge of her left by the night train."

Julius sank back again into his chair.

"Nurse Edith--left with a patient--I remember," he muttered. "My God, to have been so near!"

Dr. Hall looked bewildered.

"I don't understand. Is the young lady not with her aunt, after all?"

Tuppence shook her head. She was about to speak when a warning glance from Sir James made her hold her tongue. The lawyer rose.

"I'm much obliged to you, Hall. We're very grateful for all you've told us. I'm afraid we're now in the position of having to track Miss Vandemeyer anew. What about the nurse who accompanied her; I suppose you don't know where she is?"

The doctor shook his head.

"We've not heard from her, as it happens. I understood she was to remain with Miss Vandemeyer for a while. But what can have happened? Surely the girl has not been kidnapped."

"That remains to be seen," said Sir James gravely.

The other hesitated.

"You do not think I ought to go to the police?"

"No, no. In all probability the young lady is with other relations."

The doctor was not completely satisfied, but he saw that Sir James was determined to say no more, and realized that to try and extract more information from the famous K.C. would be mere waste of labour. Accordingly, he wished them goodbye, and they left the hotel. For a few minutes they stood by the car talking.

"How maddening," cried Tuppence. "To think that Julius must have been actually under the same roof with her for a few hours."

"I was a darned idiot," muttered Julius gloomily.

"You couldn't know," Tuppence consoled him. "Could he?" She appealed to Sir James.

"I should advise you not to worry," said the latter kindly. "No use crying over spilt milk, you know."

"The great thing is what to do next," added Tuppence the practical.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"You might advertise for the nurse who accompanied the girl. That is the only course I can suggest, and I must confess I do not hope for much result. Otherwise there is nothing to be done."

"Nothing?" said Tuppence blankly. "And--Tommy?"

"We must hope for the best," said Sir James. "Oh yes, we must go on hoping."

But over her downcast head his eyes met Julius's, and almost imperceptibly he shook his head. Julius understood. The lawyer considered the case hopeless. The young American's face grew grave. Sir James took Tuppence's hand.

"You must let me know if anything further comes to light. Letters will always be forwarded."

Tuppence stared at him blankly.

"You are going away?"

"I told you. Don't you remember? To Scotland."

"Yes, but I thought----" The girl hesitated.

Sir James shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear young lady, I can do nothing more, I fear. Our clues have all ended in thin air. You can take my word for it that there is nothing more to be done. If anything should arise, I shall be glad to advise you in any way I can."

His words gave Tuppence an extraordinarily desolate feeling.

"I suppose you're right," she said. "Anyway, thank you very much for trying to help us. Good-bye."

Julius was bending over the car. A momentary pity came into Sir James's keen eyes, as he gazed into the girl's downcast face.

"Don't be too disconsolate, Miss Tuppence," he said in a low voice. "Remember, holiday-time isn't always all playtime. One sometimes manages to put in some work as well."

Something in his tone made Tuppence glance up sharply. He shook his head with a smile.

"No, I shan't say any more. Great mistake to say too much. Remember that. Never tell all you know--not even to the person you know best. Understand? Good-bye."

He strode away. Tuppence stared after him. She was beginning to understand Sir James's methods. Once before he had thrown her a hint in the same careless fashion. Was this a hint? What exactly lay behind those last brief words? Did he mean that, after all, he had not abandoned the case; that, secretly, he would be working on it still while----

Her meditations were interrupted by Julius, who adjured her to "get right in."

"You're looking kind of thoughtful," he remarked as they started off. "Did the old guy say anything more?"

Tuppence opened her mouth impulsively, and then shut it again. Sir James's words sounded in her ears: "Never tell all you know--not even to the person you know best." And like a flash there came into her mind another memory. Julius before the safe in the flat, her own question and the pause before his reply, "Nothing." Was there really nothing? Or had he found something he wished to keep to himself? If he could make a reservation, so could she.

"Nothing particular," she replied.

She felt rather than saw Julius throw a sideways glance at her.

"Say, shall we go for a spin in the park?"

"If you like."

For a while they ran on under the trees in silence. It was a beautiful day. The keen rush through the air brought a new exhilaration to Tuppence.

"Say, Miss Tuppence, do you think I'm ever going to find Jane?"

Julius spoke in a discouraged voice. The mood was so alien to him that Tuppence turned and stared at him in surprise. He nodded.

"That's so. I'm getting down and out over the business. Sir James to-day hadn't got any hope at all, I could see that. I don't like him--we don't gee together somehow--but he's pretty cute, and I guess he wouldn't quit if there was any chance of success--now, would he?"

Tuppence felt rather uncomfortable, but clinging to her belief that Julius also had withheld something from her, she remained firm.

"He suggested advertising for the nurse," she reminded him.

"Yes, with a 'forlorn hope' flavour to his voice! No--I'm about fed up. I've half a mind to go back to the States right away."

"Oh no!" cried Tuppence. "We've got to find Tommy."

"I sure forgot Beresford," said Julius contritely. "That's so. We must find him. But after--well, I've been day-dreaming ever since I started on this trip--and these dreams are rotten poor business. I'm quit of them. Say, Miss Tuppence, there's something I'd like to ask you."

"Yes?"

"You and Beresford. What about it?"

"I don't understand you," replied Tuppence with dignity, adding rather inconsequently: "And, anyway, you're wrong!"

"Not got a sort of kindly feeling for one another?"

"Certainly not," said Tuppence with warmth. "Tommy and I are friends--nothing more."

"I guess every pair of lovers has said that sometime or another," observed Julius.

"Nonsense!" snapped Tuppence. "Do I look the sort of girl that's always falling in love with every man she meets?"

"You do not. You look the sort of girl that's mighty often getting fallen in love with!"

"Oh!" said Tuppence, rather taken aback. "That's a compliment, I suppose?"

"Sure. Now let's get down to this. Supposing we never find Beresford and--and----"

"All right--say it! I can face facts. Supposing he's--dead! Well?"

"And all this business fiddles out. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said Tuppence forlornly.

"You'll be darned lonesome, you poor kid."

"I shall be all right," snapped Tuppence with her usual resentment of any kind of pity.

"What about marriage?" inquired Julius. "Got any views on the subject?"

"I intend to marry, of course," replied Tuppence. "That is, if"--she paused, knew a momentary longing to draw back, and then stuck to her guns bravely--"I can find some one rich enough to make it worth my while. That's frank, isn't it? I dare say you despise me for it."

"I never despise business instinct," said Julius. "What particular figure have you in mind?"

"Figure?" asked Tuppence, puzzled. "Do you mean tall or short?"

"No. Sum--income."

"Oh, I--I haven't quite worked that out."

"What about me?"

"You?"

"Sure thing."

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"Why not?"

"I tell you I couldn't."

"Again, why not?"

"It would seem so unfair."

"I don't see anything unfair about it. I call your bluff, that's all. I admire you immensely, Miss Tuppence, more than any girl I've ever met. You're so darned plucky. I'd just love to give you a real, rattling good time. Say the word, and we'll run round right away to some high-class jeweller, and fix up the ring business."

"I can't," gasped Tuppence.

"Because of Beresford?"

"No, no, NO!"

"Well then?"

Tuppence merely continued to shake her head violently.

"You can't reasonably expect more dollars than I've got."

"Oh, it isn't that," gasped Tuppence with an almost hysterical laugh. "But thanking you very much, and all that, I think I'd better say no."

"I'd be obliged if you'd do me the favour to think it over until to-morrow."

"It's no use."

"Still, I guess we'll leave it like that."

"Very well," said Tuppence meekly.

Neither of them spoke again until they reached the Ritz.

Tuppence went upstairs to her room. She felt morally battered to the ground after her conflict with Julius's vigorous personality. Sitting down in front of the glass, she stared at her own reflection for some minutes.

"Fool," murmured Tuppence at length, making a grimace. "Little fool. Everything you want--everything you've ever hoped for, and you go and bleat out 'no' like an idiotic little sheep. It's your one chance. Why don't you take it? Grab it? Snatch at it? What more do you want?"

As if in answer to her own question, her eyes fell on a small snapshot of Tommy that stood on her dressing-table in a shabby frame. For a moment she struggled for self-control, and then abandoning all presence, she held it to her lips and burst into a fit of sobbing.

"Oh, Tommy, Tommy," she cried, "I do love you so--and I may never see you again...."

At the end of five minutes Tuppence sat up, blew her nose, and pushed back her hair.

"That's that," she observed sternly. "Let's look facts in the face. I seem to have fallen in love--with an idiot of a boy who probably doesn't care two straws about me." Here she paused. "Anyway," she resumed, as though arguing with an

unseen opponent, "I don't KNOW that he does. He'd never have dared to say so. I've always jumped on sentiment--and here I am being more sentimental than anybody. What idiots girls are! I've always thought so. I suppose I shall sleep with his photograph under my pillow, and dream about him all night. It's dreadful to feel you've been false to your principles."

Tuppence shook her head sadly, as she reviewed her backsliding.

"I don't know what to say to Julius, I'm sure. Oh, what a fool I feel! I'll have to say SOMETHING--he's so American and thorough, he'll insist upon having a reason. I wonder if he did find anything in that safe----"

Tuppence's meditations went off on another tack. She reviewed the events of last night carefully and persistently. Somehow, they seemed bound up with Sir James's enigmatical words....

Suddenly she gave a great start--the colour faded out of her face. Her eyes, fascinated, gazed in front of her, the pupils dilated.

"Impossible," she murmured. "Impossible! I must be going mad even to think of such a thing...."

Monstrous--yet it explained everything....

After a moment's reflection she sat down and wrote a note, weighing each word as she did so. Finally she nodded her head as though satisfied, and slipped it into an envelope which she addressed to Julius. She went down the passage to his sitting-room and knocked at the door. As she had expected, the room was empty. She left the note on the table.

A small page-boy was waiting outside her own door when she returned to it.

"Telegram for you, miss."

Tuppence took it from the salver, and tore it open carelessly. Then she gave a cry. The telegram was from Tommy!