

## **CHAPTER XVI. FURTHER ADVENTURES OF TOMMY**

FROM a darkness punctuated with throbbing stabs of fire, Tommy dragged his senses slowly back to life. When he at last opened his eyes, he was conscious of nothing but an excruciating pain through his temples. He was vaguely aware of unfamiliar surroundings. Where was he? What had happened? He blinked feebly. This was not his bedroom at the Ritz. And what the devil was the matter with his head?

"Damn!" said Tommy, and tried to sit up. He had remembered. He was in that sinister house in Soho. He uttered a groan and fell back. Through his almost-closed lids he reconnoitred carefully.

"He is coming to," remarked a voice very near Tommy's ear. He recognized it at once for that of the bearded and efficient German, and lay artistically inert. He felt that it would be a pity to come round too soon; and until the pain in his head became a little less acute, he felt quite incapable of collecting his wits. Painfully he tried to puzzle out what had happened. Obviously somebody must have crept up behind him as he listened and struck him down with a blow on the head. They knew him now for a spy, and would in all probability give him short shrift. Undoubtedly he was in a tight place. Nobody knew where he was, therefore he need expect no outside assistance, and must depend solely on his own wits.

"Well, here goes," murmured Tommy to himself, and repeated his former remark.

"Damn!" he observed, and this time succeeded in sitting up.

In a minute the German stepped forward and placed a glass to his lips, with the brief command "Drink." Tommy obeyed. The potency of the draught made him choke, but it cleared his brain in a marvellous manner.

He was lying on a couch in the room in which the meeting had been held. On one side of him was the German, on the other the villainous-faced doorkeeper who had let him in. The others were grouped together at a little distance away. But Tommy missed one face. The man known as Number One was no longer of the company.

"Feel better?" asked the German, as he removed the empty glass.

"Yes, thanks," returned Tommy cheerfully.

"Ah, my young friend, it is lucky for you your skull is so thick. The good Conrad struck hard." He indicated the evil-faced doorkeeper by a nod. The man grinned.

Tommy twisted his head round with an effort.

"Oh," he said, "so you're Conrad, are you? It strikes me the thickness of my skull was lucky for you too. When I look at you I feel it's almost a pity I've enabled you to cheat the hangman."

The man snarled, and the bearded man said quietly:

"He would have run no risk of that."

"Just as you like," replied Tommy. "I know it's the fashion to run down the police. I rather believe in them myself."

His manner was nonchalant to the last degree. Tommy Beresford was one of those young Englishmen not distinguished by any special intellectual ability, but who are emphatically at their best in what is known as a "tight place." Their natural diffidence and caution fall from them like a glove. Tommy realized perfectly that in his own wits lay the only chance of escape, and behind his casual manner he was racking his brains furiously.

The cold accents of the German took up the conversation:

"Have you anything to say before you are put to death as a spy?"

"Simply lots of things," replied Tommy with the same urbanity as before.

"Do you deny that you were listening at that door?"

"I do not. I must really apologize--but your conversation was so interesting that it overcame my scruples."

"How did you get in?"

"Dear old Conrad here." Tommy smiled deprecatingly at him. "I hesitate to suggest pensioning off a faithful servant, but you really ought to have a better watchdog."

Conrad snarled impotently, and said sullenly, as the man with the beard swung

round upon him:

"He gave the word. How was I to know?"

"Yes," Tommy chimed in. "How was he to know? Don't blame the poor fellow. His hasty action has given me the pleasure of seeing you all face to face."

He fancied that his words caused some discomposure among the group, but the watchful German stilled it with a wave of his hand.

"Dead men tell no tales," he said evenly.

"Ah," said Tommy, "but I'm not dead yet!"

"You soon will be, my young friend," said the German.

An assenting murmur came from the others.

Tommy's heart beat faster, but his casual pleasantness did not waver.

"I think not," he said firmly. "I should have a great objection to dying."

He had got them puzzled, he saw that by the look on his captor's face.

"Can you give us any reason why we should not put you to death?" asked the German.

"Several," replied Tommy. "Look here, you've been asking me a lot of questions. Let me ask you one for a change. Why didn't you kill me off at once before I regained consciousness?"

The German hesitated, and Tommy seized his advantage.

"Because you didn't know how much I knew--and where I obtained that knowledge. If you kill me now, you never will know."

But here the emotions of Boris became too much for him. He stepped forward waving his arms.

"You hell-hound of a spy," he screamed. "We will give you short shrift. Kill him! Kill him!"

There was a roar of applause.

"You hear?" said the German, his eyes on Tommy. "What have you to say to that?"

"Say?" Tommy shrugged his shoulders. "Pack of fools. Let them ask themselves a few questions. How did I get into this place? Remember what dear old Conrad said--WITH YOUR OWN PASSWORD, wasn't it? How did I get hold of that? You don't suppose I came up those steps haphazard and said the first thing that came into my head?"

Tommy was pleased with the concluding words of this speech. His only regret was that Tuppence was not present to appreciate its full flavour.

"That is true," said the working man suddenly. "Comrades, we have been betrayed!"

An ugly murmur arose. Tommy smiled at them encouragingly.

"That's better. How can you hope to make a success of any job if you don't use your brains?"

"You will tell us who has betrayed us," said the German. "But that shall not save you--oh, no! You shall tell us all that you know. Boris, here, knows pretty ways of making people speak!"

"Bah!" said Tommy scornfully, fighting down a singularly unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. "You will neither torture me nor kill me."

"And why not?" asked Boris.

"Because you'd kill the goose that lays the golden eggs," replied Tommy quietly.

There was a momentary pause. It seemed as though Tommy's persistent assurance was at last conquering. They were no longer completely sure of themselves. The man in the shabby clothes stared at Tommy searchingly.

"He's bluffing you, Boris," he said quietly.

Tommy hated him. Had the man seen through him?

The German, with an effort, turned roughly to Tommy.

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think I mean?" parried Tommy, searching desperately in his own mind.

Suddenly Boris stepped forward, and shook his fist in Tommy's face.

"Speak, you swine of an Englishman--speak!"

"Don't get so excited, my good fellow," said Tommy calmly. "That's the worst of you foreigners. You can't keep calm. Now, I ask you, do I look as though I thought there were the least chance of your killing me?"

He looked confidently round, and was glad they could not hear the persistent beating of his heart which gave the lie to his words.

"No," admitted Boris at last sullenly, "you do not."

"Thank God, he's not a mind reader," thought Tommy. Aloud he pursued his advantage:

"And why am I so confident? Because I know something that puts me in a position to propose a bargain."

"A bargain?" The bearded man took him up sharply.

"Yes--a bargain. My life and liberty against----" He paused.

"Against what?"

The group pressed forward. You could have heard a pin drop.

Slowly Tommy spoke.

"The papers that Danvers brought over from America in the Lusitania."

The effect of his words was electrical. Every one was on his feet. The German waved them back. He leaned over Tommy, his face purple with excitement.

"Himmel! You have got them, then?"

With magnificent calm Tommy shook his head.

"You know where they are?" persisted the German.

Again Tommy shook his head. "Not in the least."

"Then--then----" angry and baffled, the words failed him.

Tommy looked round. He saw anger and bewilderment on every face, but his calm assurance had done its work--no one doubted but that something lay behind his words.

"I don't know where the papers are--but I believe that I can find them. I have a theory----"

"Pah!"

Tommy raised his hand, and silenced the clamours of disgust.

"I call it a theory--but I'm pretty sure of my facts--facts that are known to no one but myself. In any case what do you lose? If I can produce the papers--you give me my life and liberty in exchange. Is it a bargain?"

"And if we refuse?" said the German quietly.

Tommy lay back on the couch.

"The 29th," he said thoughtfully, "is less than a fortnight ahead----"

For a moment the German hesitated. Then he made a sign to Conrad.

"Take him into the other room."

For five minutes, Tommy sat on the bed in the dingy room next door. His heart was beating violently. He had risked all on this throw. How would they decide? And all the while that this agonized questioning went on within him, he talked flippantly to Conrad, enraging the cross-grained doorkeeper to the point of homicidal mania.

At last the door opened, and the German called imperiously to Conrad to return.

"Let's hope the judge hasn't put his black cap on," remarked Tommy frivolously.

"That's right, Conrad, march me in. The prisoner is at the bar, gentlemen."

The German was seated once more behind the table. He motioned to Tommy to sit down opposite to him.

"We accept," he said harshly, "on terms. The papers must be delivered to us before you go free."

"Idiot!" said Tommy amiably. "How do you think I can look for them if you keep me tied by the leg here?"

"What do you expect, then?"

"I must have liberty to go about the business in my own way."

The German laughed.

"Do you think we are little children to let you walk out of here leaving us a pretty story full of promises?"

"No," said Tommy thoughtfully. "Though infinitely simpler for me, I did not really think you would agree to that plan. Very well, we must arrange a compromise. How would it be if you attached little Conrad here to my person. He's a faithful fellow, and very ready with the fist."

"We prefer," said the German coldly, "that you should remain here. One of our number will carry out your instructions minutely. If the operations are complicated, he will return to you with a report and you can instruct him further."

"You're tying my hands," complained Tommy. "It's a very delicate affair, and the other fellow will muff it up as likely as not, and then where shall I be? I don't believe one of you has got an ounce of tact."

The German rapped the table.

"Those are our terms. Otherwise, death!"

Tommy leaned back wearily.

"I like your style. Curt, but attractive. So be it, then. But one thing is essential, I must see the girl."

"What girl?"

"Jane Finn, of course."

The other looked at him curiously for some minutes, then he said slowly, and as though choosing his words with care:

"Do you not know that she can tell you nothing?"

Tommy's heart beat a little faster. Would he succeed in coming face to face with the girl he was seeking?

"I shall not ask her to tell me anything," he said quietly. "Not in so many words, that is."

"Then why see her?"

Tommy paused.

"To watch her face when I ask her one question," he replied at last.

Again there was a look in the German's eyes that Tommy did not quite understand.

"She will not be able to answer your question."

"That does not matter. I shall have seen her face when I ask it."

"And you think that will tell you anything?" He gave a short disagreeable laugh. More than ever, Tommy felt that there was a factor somewhere that he did not understand. The German looked at him searchingly. "I wonder whether, after all, you know as much as we think?" he said softly.

Tommy felt his ascendancy less sure than a moment before. His hold had slipped a little. But he was puzzled. What had he said wrong? He spoke out on the impulse of the moment.

"There may be things that you know which I do not. I have not pretended to be aware of all the details of your show. But equally I've got something up my sleeve that you don't know about. And that's where I mean to score. Danvers was a damned clever fellow----" He broke off as if he had said too much.



But the German's face had lightened a little.

"Danvers," he murmured. "I see----" He paused a minute, then waved to Conrad. "Take him away. Upstairs--you know."

"Wait a minute," said Tommy. "What about the girl?"

"That may perhaps be arranged."

"It must be."

"We will see about it. Only one person can decide that."

"Who?" asked Tommy. But he knew the answer.

"Mr. Brown----"

"Shall I see him?"

"Perhaps."

"Come," said Conrad harshly.

Tommy rose obediently. Outside the door his gaoler motioned to him to mount the stairs. He himself followed close behind. On the floor above Conrad opened a door and Tommy passed into a small room. Conrad lit a hissing gas burner and went out. Tommy heard the sound of the key being turned in the lock.

He set to work to examine his prison. It was a smaller room than the one downstairs, and there was something peculiarly airless about the atmosphere of it. Then he realized that there was no window. He walked round it. The walls were filthily dirty, as everywhere else. Four pictures hung crookedly on the wall representing scenes from Faust. Marguerite with her box of jewels, the church scene, Siebel and his flowers, and Faust and Mephistopheles. The latter brought Tommy's mind back to Mr. Brown again. In this sealed and closed chamber, with its close-fitting heavy door, he felt cut off from the world, and the sinister power of the arch-criminal seemed more real. Shout as he would, no one could ever hear him. The place was a living tomb....

With an effort Tommy pulled himself together. He sank on to the bed and gave himself up to reflection. His head ached badly; also, he was hungry. The silence

of the place was dispiriting.

"Anyway," said Tommy, trying to cheer himself, "I shall see the chief--the mysterious Mr. Brown and with a bit of luck in bluffing I shall see the mysterious Jane Finn also. After that----"

After that Tommy was forced to admit the prospect looked dreary.