

CHAPTER XVII. ANNETTE

THE troubles of the future, however, soon faded before the troubles of the present. And of these, the most immediate and pressing was that of hunger. Tommy had a healthy and vigorous appetite. The steak and chips partaken of for lunch seemed now to belong to another decade. He regretfully recognized the fact that he would not make a success of a hunger strike.

He prowled aimlessly about his prison. Once or twice he discarded dignity, and pounded on the door. But nobody answered the summons.

"Hang it all!" said Tommy indignantly. "They can't mean to starve me to death." A new-born fear passed through his mind that this might, perhaps, be one of those "pretty ways" of making a prisoner speak, which had been attributed to Boris. But on reflection he dismissed the idea.

"It's that sour faced brute Conrad," he decided. "That's a fellow I shall enjoy getting even with one of these days. This is just a bit of spite on his part. I'm certain of it."

Further meditations induced in him the feeling that it would be extremely pleasant to bring something down with a whack on Conrad's egg-shaped head. Tommy stroked his own head tenderly, and gave himself up to the pleasures of imagination. Finally a bright idea flashed across his brain. Why not convert imagination into reality? Conrad was undoubtedly the tenant of the house. The others, with the possible exception of the bearded German, merely used it as a rendezvous. Therefore, why not wait in ambush for Conrad behind the door, and when he entered bring down a chair, or one of the decrepit pictures, smartly on to his head. One would, of course, be careful not to hit too hard. And then--and then, simply walk out! If he met anyone on the way down, well----Tommy brightened at the thought of an encounter with his fists. Such an affair was infinitely more in his line than the verbal encounter of this afternoon. Intoxicated by his plan, Tommy gently unhooked the picture of the Devil and Faust, and settled himself in position. His hopes were high. The plan seemed to him simple but excellent.

Time went on, but Conrad did not appear. Night and day were the same in this prison room, but Tommy's wrist-watch, which enjoyed a certain degree of accuracy, informed him that it was nine o'clock in the evening. Tommy reflected gloomily that if supper did not arrive soon it would be a question of waiting for

breakfast. At ten o'clock hope deserted him, and he flung himself on the bed to seek consolation in sleep. In five minutes his woes were forgotten.

The sound of the key turning in the lock awoke him from his slumbers. Not belonging to the type of hero who is famous for awaking in full possession of his faculties, Tommy merely blinked at the ceiling and wondered vaguely where he was. Then he remembered, and looked at his watch. It was eight o'clock.

"It's either early morning tea or breakfast," deduced the young man, "and pray God it's the latter!"

The door swung open. Too late, Tommy remembered his scheme of obliterating the unprepossessing Conrad. A moment later he was glad that he had, for it was not Conrad who entered, but a girl. She carried a tray which she set down on the table.

In the feeble light of the gas burner Tommy blinked at her. He decided at once that she was one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. Her hair was a full rich brown, with sudden glints of gold in it as though there were imprisoned sunbeams struggling in its depths. There was a wild-rose quality about her face. Her eyes, set wide apart, were hazel, a golden hazel that again recalled a memory of sunbeams.

A delirious thought shot through Tommy's mind.

"Are you Jane Finn?" he asked breathlessly.

The girl shook her head wonderingly.

"My name is Annette, monsieur."

She spoke in a soft, broken English.

"Oh!" said Tommy, rather taken aback. "Francaise?" he hazarded.

"Oui, monsieur. Monsieur parle francais?"

"Not for any length of time," said Tommy. "What's that? Breakfast?"

The girl nodded. Tommy dropped off the bed and came and inspected the contents of the tray. It consisted of a loaf, some margarine, and a jug of coffee.

"The living is not equal to the Ritz," he observed with a sigh. "But for what we are at last about to receive the Lord has made me truly thankful. Amen."

He drew up a chair, and the girl turned away to the door.

"Wait a sec," cried Tommy. "There are lots of things I want to ask you, Annette. What are you doing in this house? Don't tell me you're Conrad's niece, or daughter, or anything, because I can't believe it."

"I do the SERVICE, monsieur. I am not related to anybody."

"I see," said Tommy. "You know what I asked you just now. Have you ever heard that name?"

"I have heard people speak of Jane Finn, I think."

"You don't know where she is?"

Annette shook her head.

"She's not in this house, for instance?"

"Oh no, monsieur. I must go now--they will be waiting for me."

She hurried out. The key turned in the lock.

"I wonder who 'they' are," mused Tommy, as he continued to make inroads on the loaf. "With a bit of luck, that girl might help me to get out of here. She doesn't look like one of the gang."

At one o'clock Annette reappeared with another tray, but this time Conrad accompanied her.

"Good morning," said Tommy amiably. "You have NOT used Pear's soap, I see."

Conrad growled threateningly.

"No light repartee, have you, old bean? There, there, we can't always have brains as well as beauty. What have we for lunch? Stew? How did I know? Elementary, my dear Watson--the smell of onions is unmistakable."

"Talk away," grunted the man. "It's little enough time you'll have to talk in,

maybe."

The remark was unpleasant in its suggestion, but Tommy ignored it. He sat down at the table.

"Retire, varlet," he said, with a wave of his hand. "Prate not to thy betters."

That evening Tommy sat on the bed, and cogitated deeply. Would Conrad again accompany the girl? If he did not, should he risk trying to make an ally of her? He decided that he must leave no stone unturned. His position was desperate.

At eight o'clock the familiar sound of the key turning made him spring to his feet. The girl was alone.

"Shut the door," he commanded. "I want to speak to you." She obeyed.

"Look here, Annette, I want you to help me get out of this." She shook her head.

"Impossible. There are three of them on the floor below."

"Oh!" Tommy was secretly grateful for the information. "But you would help me if you could?"

"No, monsieur."

"Why not?"

The girl hesitated.

"I think--they are my own people. You have spied upon them. They are quite right to keep you here."

"They're a bad lot, Annette. If you'll help me, I'll take you away from the lot of them. And you'd probably get a good whack of money."

But the girl merely shook her head.

"I dare not, monsieur; I am afraid of them."

She turned away.

"Wouldn't you do anything to help another girl?" cried Tommy. "She's about your

age too. Won't you save her from their clutches?"

"You mean Jane Finn?"

"Yes."

"It is her you came here to look for? Yes?"

"That's it."

The girl looked at him, then passed her hand across her forehead.

"Jane Finn. Always I hear that name. It is familiar."

Tommy came forward eagerly.

"You must know SOMETHING about her?"

But the girl turned away abruptly.

"I know nothing--only the name." She walked towards the door. Suddenly she uttered a cry. Tommy stared. She had caught sight of the picture he had laid against the wall the night before. For a moment he caught a look of terror in her eyes. As inexplicably it changed to relief. Then abruptly she went out of the room. Tommy could make nothing of it. Did she fancy that he had meant to attack her with it? Surely not. He rehung the picture on the wall thoughtfully.

Three more days went by in dreary inaction. Tommy felt the strain telling on his nerves. He saw no one but Conrad and Annette, and the girl had become dumb. She spoke only in monosyllables. A kind of dark suspicion smouldered in her eyes. Tommy felt that if this solitary confinement went on much longer he would go mad. He gathered from Conrad that they were waiting for orders from "Mr. Brown." Perhaps, thought Tommy, he was abroad or away, and they were obliged to wait for his return.

But the evening of the third day brought a rude awakening.

It was barely seven o'clock when he heard the tramp of footsteps outside in the passage. In another minute the door was flung open. Conrad entered. With him was the evil-looking Number 14. Tommy's heart sank at the sight of them.

"Evenin', gov'nor," said the man with a leer. "Got those ropes, mate?"

The silent Conrad produced a length of fine cord. The next minute Number 14's hands, horribly dexterous, were winding the cord round his limbs, while Conrad held him down.

"What the devil----?" began Tommy.

But the slow, speechless grin of the silent Conrad froze the words on his lips.

Number 14 proceeded deftly with his task. In another minute Tommy was a mere helpless bundle. Then at last Conrad spoke:

"Thought you'd bluffed us, did you? With what you knew, and what you didn't know. Bargained with us! And all the time it was bluff! Bluff! You know less than a kitten. But your number's up now all right, you b----swine."

Tommy lay silent. There was nothing to say. He had failed. Somehow or other the omnipotent Mr. Brown had seen through his pretensions. Suddenly a thought occurred to him.

"A very good speech, Conrad," he said approvingly. "But wherefore the bonds and fetters? Why not let this kind gentleman here cut my throat without delay?"

"Garn," said Number 14 unexpectedly. "Think we're as green as to do you in here, and have the police nosing round? Not 'alf! We've ordered the carriage for your lordship to-morrow mornin', but in the meantime we're not taking any chances, see!"

"Nothing," said Tommy, "could be plainer than your words--unless it was your face."

"Stow it," said Number 14.

"With pleasure," replied Tommy. "You're making a sad mistake--but yours will be the loss."

"You don't kid us that way again," said Number 14. "Talking as though you were still at the blooming Ritz, aren't you?"

Tommy made no reply. He was engaged in wondering how Mr. Brown had discovered his identity. He decided that Tuppence, in the throes of anxiety, had gone to the police, and that his disappearance having been made public the gang

had not been slow to put two and two together.

The two men departed and the door slammed. Tommy was left to his meditations. They were not pleasant ones. Already his limbs felt cramped and stiff. He was utterly helpless, and he could see no hope anywhere.

About an hour had passed when he heard the key softly turned, and the door opened. It was Annette. Tommy's heart beat a little faster. He had forgotten the girl. Was it possible that she had come to his help?

Suddenly he heard Conrad's voice:

"Come out of it, Annette. He doesn't want any supper to-night."

"Oui, oui, je sais bien. But I must take the other tray. We need the things on it."

"Well, hurry up," growled Conrad.

Without looking at Tommy the girl went over to the table, and picked up the tray. She raised a hand and turned out the light.

"Curse you"--Conrad had come to the door--"why did you do that?"

"I always turn it out. You should have told me. Shall I relight it, Monsieur Conrad?"

"No, come on out of it."

"Le beau petit monsieur," cried Annette, pausing by the bed in the darkness. "You have tied him up well, hein? He is like a trussed chicken!" The frank amusement in her tone jarred on the boy; but at that moment, to his amazement, he felt her hand running lightly over his bonds, and something small and cold was pressed into the palm of his hand.

"Come on, Annette."

"Mais me voila."

The door shut. Tommy heard Conrad say:

"Lock it and give me the key."

The footsteps died away. Tommy lay petrified with amazement. The object Annette had thrust into his hand was a small penknife, the blade open. From the way she had studiously avoided looking at him, and her action with the light, he came to the conclusion that the room was overlooked. There must be a peep-hole somewhere in the walls. Remembering how guarded she had always been in her manner, he saw that he had probably been under observation all the time. Had he said anything to give himself away? Hardly. He had revealed a wish to escape and a desire to find Jane Finn, but nothing that could have given a clue to his own identity. True, his question to Annette had proved that he was personally unacquainted with Jane Finn, but he had never pretended otherwise. The question now was, did Annette really know more? Were her denials intended primarily for the listeners? On that point he could come to no conclusion.

But there was a more vital question that drove out all others. Could he, bound as he was, manage to cut his bonds? He essayed cautiously to rub the open blade up and down on the cord that bound his two wrists together. It was an awkward business, and drew a smothered "Ow" of pain from him as the knife cut into his wrist. But slowly and doggedly he went on sawing to and fro. He cut the flesh badly, but at last he felt the cord slacken. With his hands free, the rest was easy. Five minutes later he stood upright with some difficulty, owing to the cramp in his limbs. His first care was to bind up his bleeding wrist. Then he sat on the edge of the bed to think. Conrad had taken the key of the door, so he could expect little more assistance from Annette. The only outlet from the room was the door, consequently he would perforce have to wait until the two men returned to fetch him. But when they did... Tommy smiled! Moving with infinite caution in the dark room, he found and unhooked the famous picture. He felt an economical pleasure that his first plan would not be wasted. There was now nothing to do but to wait. He waited.

The night passed slowly. Tommy lived through an eternity of hours, but at last he heard footsteps. He stood upright, drew a deep breath, and clutched the picture firmly.

The door opened. A faint light streamed in from outside. Conrad went straight towards the gas to light it. Tommy deeply regretted that it was he who had entered first. It would have been pleasant to get even with Conrad. Number 14 followed. As he stepped across the threshold, Tommy brought the picture down with terrific force on his head. Number 14 went down amidst a stupendous crash of broken glass. In a minute Tommy had slipped out and pulled to the door. The key was in the lock. He turned it and withdrew it just as Conrad hurled himself against the door from the inside with a volley of curses.

For a moment Tommy hesitated. There was the sound of some one stirring on the floor below. Then the German's voice came up the stairs.

"Gott im Himmel! Conrad, what is it?"

Tommy felt a small hand thrust into his. Beside him stood Annette. She pointed up a rickety ladder that apparently led to some attics.

"Quick--up here!" She dragged him after her up the ladder. In another moment they were standing in a dusty garret littered with lumber. Tommy looked round.

"This won't do. It's a regular trap. There's no way out."

"Hush! Wait." The girl put her finger to her lips. She crept to the top of the ladder and listened.

The banging and beating on the door was terrific. The German and another were trying to force the door in. Annette explained in a whisper:

"They will think you are still inside. They cannot hear what Conrad says. The door is too thick."

"I thought you could hear what went on in the room?"

"There is a peep-hole into the next room. It was clever of you to guess. But they will not think of that--they are only anxious to get in."

"Yes--but look here----"

"Leave it to me." She bent down. To his amazement, Tommy saw that she was fastening the end of a long piece of string to the handle of a big cracked jug. She arranged it carefully, then turned to Tommy.

"Have you the key of the door?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

He handed it to her.

"I am going down. Do you think you can go halfway, and then swing yourself

down BEHIND the ladder, so that they will not see you?"

Tommy nodded.

"There's a big cupboard in the shadow of the landing. Stand behind it. Take the end of this string in your hand. When I've let the others out--PULL!"

Before he had time to ask her anything more, she had flitted lightly down the ladder and was in the midst of the group with a loud cry:

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?"

The German turned on her with an oath.

"Get out of this. Go to your room!"

Very cautiously Tommy swung himself down the back of the ladder. So long as they did not turn round... all was well. He crouched behind the cupboard. They were still between him and the stairs.

"AH!" Annette appeared to stumble over something. She stooped. "Mon Dieu, voila la clef!"

The German snatched it from her. He unlocked the door. Conrad stumbled out, swearing.

"Where is he? Have you got him?"

"We have seen no one," said the German sharply. His face paled. "Who do you mean?"

Conrad gave vent to another oath.

"He's got away."

"Impossible. He would have passed us."

At that moment, with an ecstatic smile Tommy pulled the string. A crash of crockery came from the attic above. In a trice the men were pushing each other up the rickety ladder and had disappeared into the darkness above.

Quick as a flash Tommy leapt from his hiding-place and dashed down the stairs,

pulling the girl with him. There was no one in the hall. He fumbled over the bolts and chain. At last they yielded, the door swung open. He turned. Annette had disappeared.

Tommy stood spell-bound. Had she run upstairs again? What madness possessed her! He fumed with impatience, but he stood his ground. He would not go without her.

And suddenly there was an outcry overhead, an exclamation from the German, and then Annette's voice, clear and high:

"Ma foi, he has escaped! And quickly! Who would have thought it?"

Tommy still stood rooted to the ground. Was that a command to him to go? He fancied it was.

And then, louder still, the words floated down to him:

"This is a terrible house. I want to go back to Marguerite. To Marguerite. TO MARGUERITE!"

Tommy had run back to the stairs. She wanted him to go and leave her. But why? At all costs he must try and get her away with him. Then his heart sank. Conrad was leaping down the stairs, uttering a savage cry at the sight of him. After him came the others.

Tommy stopped Conrad's rush with a straight blow with his fist. It caught the other on the point of the jaw and he fell like a log. The second man tripped over his body and fell. From higher up the staircase there was a flash, and a bullet grazed Tommy's ear. He realized that it would be good for his health to get out of this house as soon as possible. As regards Annette he could do nothing. He had got even with Conrad, which was one satisfaction. The blow had been a good one.

He leapt for the door, slamming it behind him. The square was deserted. In front of the house was a baker's van. Evidently he was to have been taken out of London in that, and his body found many miles from the house in Soho. The driver jumped to the pavement and tried to bar Tommy's way. Again Tommy's fist shot out, and the driver sprawled on the pavement.

Tommy took to his heels and ran--none too soon. The front door opened and a hail of bullets followed him. Fortunately none of them hit him. He turned the corner of the square.

"There's one thing," he thought to himself, "they can't go on shooting. They'll have the police after them if they do. I wonder they dared to there."

He heard the footsteps of his pursuers behind him, and redoubled his own pace. Once he got out of these by-ways he would be safe. There would be a policeman about somewhere--not that he really wanted to invoke the aid of the police if he could possibly do without it. It meant explanations, and general awkwardness. In another moment he had reason to bless his luck. He stumbled over a prostrate figure, which started up with a yell of alarm and dashed off down the street. Tommy drew back into a doorway. In a minute he had the pleasure of seeing his two pursuers, of whom the German was one, industriously tracking down the red herring!

Tommy sat down quietly on the doorstep and allowed a few moments to elapse while he recovered his breath. Then he strolled gently in the opposite direction. He glanced at his watch. It was a little after half-past five. It was rapidly growing light. At the next corner he passed a policeman. The policeman cast a suspicious eye on him. Tommy felt slightly offended. Then, passing his hand over his face, he laughed. He had not shaved or washed for three days! What a guy he must look.

He betook himself without more ado to a Turkish Bath establishment which he knew to be open all night. He emerged into the busy daylight feeling himself once more, and able to make plans.

First of all, he must have a square meal. He had eaten nothing since midday yesterday. He turned into an A.B.C. shop and ordered eggs and bacon and coffee. Whilst he ate, he read a morning paper propped up in front of him. Suddenly he stiffened. There was a long article on Kramenin, who was described as the "man behind Bolshevism" in Russia, and who had just arrived in London--some thought as an unofficial envoy. His career was sketched lightly, and it was firmly asserted that he, and not the figurehead leaders, had been the author of the Russian Revolution.

In the centre of the page was his portrait.

"So that's who Number 1 is," said Tommy with his mouth full of eggs and bacon. "Not a doubt about it, I must push on."

He paid for his breakfast, and betook himself to Whitehall. There he sent up his name, and the message that it was urgent. A few minutes later he was in the presence of the man who did not here go by the name of "Mr. Carter." There was a

frown on his face.

"Look here, you've no business to come asking for me in this way. I thought that was distinctly understood?"

"It was, sir. But I judged it important to lose no time."

And as briefly and succinctly as possible he detailed the experiences of the last few days.

Half-way through, Mr. Carter interrupted him to give a few cryptic orders through the telephone. All traces of displeasure had now left his face. He nodded energetically when Tommy had finished.

"Quite right. Every moment's of value. Fear we shall be too late anyway. They wouldn't wait. Would clear out at once. Still, they may have left something behind them that will be a clue. You say you've recognized Number 1 to be Kramenin? That's important. We want something against him badly to prevent the Cabinet falling on his neck too freely. What about the others? You say two faces were familiar to you? One's a Labour man, you think? Just look through these photos, and see if you can spot him."

A minute later, Tommy held one up. Mr. Carter exhibited some surprise.

"Ah, Westway! Shouldn't have thought it. Poses as being moderate. As for the other fellow, I think I can give a good guess." He handed another photograph to Tommy, and smiled at the other's exclamation. "I'm right, then. Who is he? Irishman. Prominent Unionist M.P. All a blind, of course. We've suspected it--but couldn't get any proof. Yes, you've done very well, young man. The 29th, you say, is the date. That gives us very little time--very little time indeed."

"But----" Tommy hesitated.

Mr. Carter read his thoughts.

"We can deal with the General Strike menace, I think. It's a toss-up--but we've got a sporting chance! But if that draft treaty turns up--we're done. England will be plunged in anarchy. Ah, what's that? The car? Come on, Beresford, we'll go and have a look at this house of yours."

Two constables were on duty in front of the house in Soho. An inspector reported to Mr. Carter in a low voice. The latter turned to Tommy.

"The birds have flown--as we thought. We might as well go over it."

Going over the deserted house seemed to Tommy to partake of the character of a dream. Everything was just as it had been. The prison room with the crooked pictures, the broken jug in the attic, the meeting room with its long table. But nowhere was there a trace of papers. Everything of that kind had either been destroyed or taken away. And there was no sign of Annette.

"What you tell me about the girl puzzled me," said Mr. Carter. "You believe that she deliberately went back?"

"It would seem so, sir. She ran upstairs while I was getting the door open."

"H'm, she must belong to the gang, then; but, being a woman, didn't feel like standing by to see a personable young man killed. But evidently she's in with them, or she wouldn't have gone back."

"I can't believe she's really one of them, sir. She--seemed so different----"

"Good-looking, I suppose?" said Mr. Carter with a smile that made Tommy flush to the roots of his hair. He admitted Annette's beauty rather shamefacedly.

"By the way," observed Mr. Carter, "have you shown yourself to Miss Tuppence yet? She's been bombarding me with letters about you."

"Tuppence? I was afraid she might get a bit rattled. Did she go to the police?"

Mr. Carter shook his head.

"Then I wonder how they twigged me."

Mr. Carter looked inquiringly at him, and Tommy explained. The other nodded thoughtfully.

"True, that's rather a curious point. Unless the mention of the Ritz was an accidental remark?"

"It might have been, sir. But they must have found out about me suddenly in some way."

"Well," said Mr. Carter, looking round him, "there's nothing more to be done here."

What about some lunch with me?"

"Thanks awfully, sir. But I think I'd better get back and rout out Tuppence."

"Of course. Give her my kind regards and tell her not to believe you're killed too readily next time."

Tommy grinned.

"I take a lot of killing, sir."

"So I perceive," said Mr. Carter dryly. "Well, good-bye. Remember you're a marked man now, and take reasonable care of yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

Hailing a taxi briskly Tommy stepped in, and was swiftly borne to the Ritz' dwelling the while on the pleasurable anticipation of startling Tuppence.

"Wonder what she's been up to. Dogging 'Rita' most likely. By the way, I suppose that's who Annette meant by Marguerite. I didn't get it at the time." The thought saddened him a little, for it seemed to prove that Mrs. Vandemeyer and the girl were on intimate terms.

The taxi drew up at the Ritz. Tommy burst into its sacred portals eagerly, but his enthusiasm received a check. He was informed that Miss Cowley had gone out a quarter of an hour ago.