

CHAPTER XVIII. THE TELEGRAM

BAFFLED for the moment, Tommy strolled into the restaurant, and ordered a meal of surpassing excellence. His four days' imprisonment had taught him anew to value good food.

He was in the middle of conveying a particularly choice morsel of Sole a la Jeanette to his mouth, when he caught sight of Julius entering the room. Tommy waved a menu cheerfully, and succeeded in attracting the other's attention. At the sight of Tommy, Julius's eyes seemed as though they would pop out of his head. He strode across, and pump-handled Tommy's hand with what seemed to the latter quite unnecessary vigour.

"Holy snakes!" he ejaculated. "Is it really you?"

"Of course it is. Why shouldn't it be?"

"Why shouldn't it be? Say, man, don't you know you've been given up for dead? I guess we'd have had a solemn requiem for you in another few days."

"Who thought I was dead?" demanded Tommy.

"Tuppence."

"She remembered the proverb about the good dying young, I suppose. There must be a certain amount of original sin in me to have survived. Where is Tuppence, by the way?"

"Isn't she here?"

"No, the fellows at the office said she'd just gone out."

"Gone shopping, I guess. I dropped her here in the car about an hour ago. But, say, can't you shed that British calm of yours, and get down to it? What on God's earth have you been doing all this time?"

"If you're feeding here," replied Tommy, "order now. It's going to be a long story."

Julius drew up a chair to the opposite side of the table, summoned a hovering waiter, and dictated his wishes. Then he turned to Tommy.

"Fire ahead. I guess you've had some few adventures."

"One or two," replied Tommy modestly, and plunged into his recital.

Julius listened spellbound. Half the dishes that were placed before him he forgot to eat. At the end he heaved a long sigh.

"Bully for you. Reads like a dime novel!"

"And now for the home front," said Tommy, stretching out his hand for a peach.

"We-el," drawled Julius, "I don't mind admitting we've had some adventures too."

He, in his turn, assumed the role of narrator. Beginning with his unsuccessful reconnoitring at Bournemouth, he passed on to his return to London, the buying of the car, the growing anxieties of Tuppence, the call upon Sir James, and the sensational occurrences of the previous night.

"But who killed her?" asked Tommy. "I don't quite understand."

"The doctor kidded himself she took it herself," replied Julius dryly.

"And Sir James? What did he think?"

"Being a legal luminary, he is likewise a human oyster," replied Julius. "I should say he 'reserved judgment.'" He went on to detail the events of the morning.

"Lost her memory, eh?" said Tommy with interest. "By Jove, that explains why they looked at me so queerly when I spoke of questioning her. Bit of a slip on my part, that! But it wasn't the sort of thing a fellow would be likely to guess."

"They didn't give you any sort of hint as to where Jane was?"

Tommy shook his head regretfully.

"Not a word. I'm a bit of an ass, as you know. I ought to have got more out of them somehow."

"I guess you're lucky to be here at all. That bluff of yours was the goods all right. How you ever came to think of it all so pat beats me to a frazzle!"

"I was in such a funk I had to think of something," said Tommy simply.

There was a moment's pause, and then Tommy reverted to Mrs. Vandemeyer's death.

"There's no doubt it was chloral?"

"I believe not. At least they call it heart failure induced by an overdose, or some such claptrap. It's all right. We don't want to be worried with an inquest. But I guess Tuppence and I and even the highbrow Sir James have all got the same idea."

"Mr. Brown?" hazarded Tommy.

"Sure thing."

Tommy nodded.

"All the same," he said thoughtfully, "Mr. Brown hasn't got wings. I don't see how he got in and out."

"How about some high-class thought transference stunt? Some magnetic influence that irresistibly impelled Mrs. Vandemeyer to commit suicide?"

Tommy looked at him with respect.

"Good, Julius. Distinctly good. Especially the phraseology. But it leaves me cold. I yearn for a real Mr. Brown of flesh and blood. I think the gifted young detectives must get to work, study the entrances and exits, and tap the bumps on their foreheads until the solution of the mystery dawns on them. Let's go round to the scene of the crime. I wish we could get hold of Tuppence. The Ritz would enjoy the spectacle of the glad reunion."

Inquiry at the office revealed the fact that Tuppence had not yet returned.

"All the same, I guess I'll have a look round upstairs," said Julius. "She might be in my sitting-room." He disappeared.

Suddenly a diminutive boy spoke at Tommy's elbow:

"The young lady--she's gone away by train, I think, sir," he murmured shyly.

"What?" Tommy wheeled round upon him.

The small boy became pinker than before.

"The taxi, sir. I heard her tell the driver Charing Cross and to look sharp."

Tommy stared at him, his eyes opening wide in surprise. Emboldened, the small boy proceeded. "So I thought, having asked for an A.B.C. and a Bradshaw."

Tommy interrupted him:

"When did she ask for an A.B.C. and a Bradshaw?"

"When I took her the telegram, sir."

"A telegram?"

"Yes, sir."

"When was that?"

"About half-past twelve, sir."

"Tell me exactly what happened."

The small boy drew a long breath.

"I took up a telegram to No. 891--the lady was there. She opened it and gave a gasp, and then she said, very jolly like: 'Bring me up a Bradshaw, and an A.B.C., and look sharp, Henry.' My name isn't Henry, but----"

"Never mind your name," said Tommy impatiently. "Go on."

"Yes, sir. I brought them, and she told me to wait, and looked up something. And then she looks up at the clock, and 'Hurry up,' she says. 'Tell them to get me a taxi,' and she begins a-shoving on of her hat in front of the glass, and she was down in two ticks, almost as quick as I was, and I seed her going down the steps and into the taxi, and I heard her call out what I told you."

The small boy stopped and replenished his lungs. Tommy continued to stare at him. At that moment Julius rejoined him. He held an open letter in his hand.

"I say, Hersheimer"--Tommy turned to him--"Tuppence has gone off sleuthing on her own."

"Shucks!"

"Yes, she has. She went off in a taxi to Charing Cross in the deuce of a hurry after getting a telegram." His eye fell on the letter in Julius's hand. "Oh; she left a note for you. That's all right. Where's she off to?"

Almost unconsciously, he held out his hand for the letter, but Julius folded it up and placed it in his pocket. He seemed a trifle embarrassed.

"I guess this is nothing to do with it. It's about something else--something I asked her that she was to let me know about."

"Oh!" Tommy looked puzzled, and seemed waiting for more.

"See here," said Julius suddenly, "I'd better put you wise. I asked Miss Tuppence to marry me this morning."

"Oh!" said Tommy mechanically. He felt dazed. Julius's words were totally unexpected. For the moment they benumbed his brain.

"I'd like to tell you," continued Julius, "that before I suggested anything of the kind to Miss Tuppence, I made it clear that I didn't want to butt in in any way between her and you----"

Tommy roused himself.

"That's all right," he said quickly. "Tuppence and I have been pals for years. Nothing more." He lit a cigarette with a hand that shook ever so little. "That's quite all right. Tuppence always said that she was looking out for----"

He stopped abruptly, his face crimsoning, but Julius was in no way discomposed.

"Oh, I guess it'll be the dollars that'll do the trick. Miss Tuppence put me wise to that right away. There's no humbug about her. We ought to gee along together very well."

Tommy looked at him curiously for a minute, as though he were about to speak, then changed his mind and said nothing. Tuppence and Julius! Well, why not? Had she not lamented the fact that she knew no rich men? Had she not openly

avowed her intention of marrying for money if she ever had the chance? Her meeting with the young American millionaire had given her the chance--and it was unlikely she would be slow to avail herself of it. She was out for money. She had always said so. Why blame her because she had been true to her creed?

Nevertheless, Tommy did blame her. He was filled with a passionate and utterly illogical resentment. It was all very well to SAY things like that--but a REAL girl would never marry for money. Tuppence was utterly cold-blooded and selfish, and he would be delighted if he never saw her again! And it was a rotten world!

Julius's voice broke in on these meditations.

"Yes, we ought to get along together very well. I've heard that a girl always refuses you once--a sort of convention."

Tommy caught his arm.

"Refuses? Did you say REFUSES?"

"Sure thing. Didn't I tell you that? She just rapped out a 'no' without any kind of reason to it. The eternal feminine, the Huns call it, I've heard. But she'll come round right enough. Likely enough, I hustled her some----"

But Tommy interrupted regardless of decorum.

"What did she say in that note?" he demanded fiercely.

The obliging Julius handed it to him.

"There's no earthly clue in it as to where she's gone," he assured Tommy. "But you might as well see for yourself if you don't believe me."

The note, in Tuppence's well-known schoolboy writing, ran as follows:

"DEAR JULIUS,

"It's always better to have things in black and white. I don't feel I can be bothered to think of marriage until Tommy is found. Let's leave it till then.

"Yours affectionately,

"TUPPENCE."

Tommy handed it back, his eyes shining. His feelings had undergone a sharp reaction. He now felt that Tuppence was all that was noble and disinterested. Had she not refused Julius without hesitation? True, the note betokened signs of weakening, but he could excuse that. It read almost like a bribe to Julius to spur him on in his efforts to find Tommy, but he supposed she had not really meant it that way. Darling Tuppence, there was not a girl in the world to touch her! When he saw her----His thoughts were brought up with a sudden jerk.

"As you say," he remarked, pulling himself together, "there's not a hint here as to what she's up to. Hi--Henry!"

The small boy came obediently. Tommy produced five shillings.

"One thing more. Do you remember what the young lady did with the telegram?"

Henry gasped and spoke.

"She crumpled it up into a ball and threw it into the grate, and made a sort of noise like 'Whoop!' sir."

"Very graphic, Henry," said Tommy. "Here's your five shillings. Come on, Julius. We must find that telegram."

They hurried upstairs. Tuppence had left the key in her door. The room was as she had left it. In the fireplace was a crumpled ball of orange and white. Tommy disentangled it and smoothed out the telegram.

"Come at once, Moat House, Ebury, Yorkshire, great developments--TOMMY."

They looked at each other in stupefaction. Julius spoke first:

"You didn't send it?"

"Of course not. What does it mean?"

"I guess it means the worst," said Julius quietly. "They've got her."

"WHAT?"

"Sure thing! They signed your name, and she fell into the trap like a lamb."

"My God! What shall we do?"

"Get busy, and go after her! Right now! There's no time to waste. It's almighty luck that she didn't take the wire with her. If she had we'd probably never have traced her. But we've got to hustle. Where's that Bradshaw?"

The energy of Julius was infectious. Left to himself, Tommy would probably have sat down to think things out for a good half-hour before he decided on a plan of action. But with Julius Hersheimer about, hustling was inevitable.

After a few muttered imprecations he handed the Bradshaw to Tommy as being more conversant with its mysteries. Tommy abandoned it in favour of an A.B.C.

"Here we are. Ebury, Yorks. From King's Cross. Or St. Pancras. (Boy must have made a mistake. It was King's Cross, not CHARING Cross.) 12.50, that's the train she went by. 2.10, that's gone. 3.20 is the next--and a damned slow train too."

"What about the car?"

Tommy shook his head.

"Send it up if you like, but we'd better stick to the train. The great thing is to keep calm."

Julius groaned.

"That's so. But it gets my goat to think of that innocent young girl in danger!"

Tommy nodded abstractedly. He was thinking. In a moment or two, he said:

"I say, Julius, what do they want her for, anyway?"

"Eh? I don't get you?"

"What I mean is that I don't think it's their game to do her any harm," explained Tommy, puckering his brow with the strain of his mental processes. "She's a hostage, that's what she is. She's in no immediate danger, because if we tumble on to anything, she'd be damned useful to them. As long as they've got her, they've got the whip hand of us. See?"

"Sure thing," said Julius thoughtfully. "That's so."

"Besides," added Tommy, as an afterthought, "I've great faith in Tuppence."

The journey was wearisome, with many stops, and crowded carriages. They had to change twice, once at Doncaster, once at a small junction. Ebury was a deserted station with a solitary porter, to whom Tommy addressed himself:

"Can you tell me the way to the Moat House?"

"The Moat House? It's a tidy step from here. The big house near the sea, you mean?"

Tommy assented brazenly. After listening to the porter's meticulous but perplexing directions, they prepared to leave the station. It was beginning to rain, and they turned up the collars of their coats as they trudged through the slush of the road. Suddenly Tommy halted.

"Wait a moment." He ran back to the station and tackled the porter anew.

"Look here, do you remember a young lady who arrived by an earlier train, the 12.50 from London? She'd probably ask you the way to the Moat House."

He described Tuppence as well as he could, but the porter shook his head. Several people had arrived by the train in question. He could not call to mind one young lady in particular. But he was quite certain that no one had asked him the way to the Moat House.

Tommy rejoined Julius, and explained. Depression was settling on him like a leaden weight. He felt convinced that their quest was going to be unsuccessful. The enemy had over three hours' start. Three hours was more than enough for Mr. Brown. He would not ignore the possibility of the telegram having been found.

The way seemed endless. Once they took the wrong turning and went nearly half a mile out of their direction. It was past seven o'clock when a small boy told them that "t' Moat House" was just past the next corner.

A rusty iron gate swinging dismally on its hinges! An overgrown drive thick with leaves. There was something about the place that struck a chill to both their hearts. They went up the deserted drive. The leaves deadened their footsteps. The daylight was almost gone. It was like walking in a world of ghosts. Overhead the branches flapped and creaked with a mournful note. Occasionally a sodden leaf drifted silently down, startling them with its cold touch on their cheek.

A turn of the drive brought them in sight of the house. That, too, seemed empty and deserted. The shutters were closed, the steps up to the door overgrown with moss. Was it indeed to this desolate spot that Tuppence had been decoyed? It seemed hard to believe that a human footstep had passed this way for months.

Julius jerked the rusty bell handle. A jangling peal rang discordantly, echoing through the emptiness within. No one came. They rang again and again--but there was no sign of life. Then they walked completely round the house. Everywhere silence, and shuttered windows. If they could believe the evidence of their eyes the place was empty.

"Nothing doing," said Julius.

They retraced their steps slowly to the gate.

"There must be a village handy," continued the young American. "We'd better make inquiries there. They'll know something about the place, and whether there's been anyone there lately."

"Yes, that's not a bad idea."

Proceeding up the road, they soon came to a little hamlet. On the outskirts of it, they met a workman swinging his bag of tools, and Tommy stopped him with a question.

"The Moat House? It's empty. Been empty for years. Mrs. Sweeny's got the key if you want to go over it--next to the post office."

Tommy thanked him. They soon found the post office, which was also a sweet and general fancy shop, and knocked at the door of the cottage next to it. A clean, wholesome-looking woman opened it. She readily produced the key of the Moat House.

"Though I doubt if it's the kind of place to suit you, sir. In a terrible state of repair. Ceilings leaking and all. 'Twould need a lot of money spent on it."

"Thanks," said Tommy cheerily. "I dare say it'll be a washout, but houses are scarce nowadays."

"That they are," declared the woman heartily. "My daughter and son-in-law have been looking for a decent cottage for I don't know how long. It's all the war. Upset things terribly, it has. But excuse me, sir, it'll be too dark for you to see much of

the house. Hadn't you better wait until to-morrow?"

"That's all right. We'll have a look around this evening, anyway. We'd have been here before only we lost our way. What's the best place to stay at for the night round here?"

Mrs. Sweeny looked doubtful.

"There's the Yorkshire Arms, but it's not much of a place for gentlemen like you."

"Oh, it will do very well. Thanks. By the way, you've not had a young lady here asking for this key to-day?"

The woman shook her head.

"No one's been over the place for a long time."

"Thanks very much."

They retraced their steps to the Moat House. As the front door swung back on its hinges, protesting loudly, Julius struck a match and examined the floor carefully. Then he shook his head.

"I'd swear no one's passed this way. Look at the dust. Thick. Not a sign of a footmark."

They wandered round the deserted house. Everywhere the same tale. Thick layers of dust apparently undisturbed.

"This gets me," said Julius. "I don't believe Tuppence was ever in this house."

"She must have been."

Julius shook his head without replying.

"We'll go over it again to-morrow," said Tommy. "Perhaps we'll see more in the daylight."

On the morrow they took up the search once more, and were reluctantly forced to the conclusion that the house had not been invaded for some considerable time. They might have left the village altogether but for a fortunate discovery of Tommy's. As they were retracing their steps to the gate, he gave a sudden cry,

and stooping, picked something up from among the leaves, and held it out to Julius. It was a small gold brooch.

"That's Tuppence's!"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I've often seen her wear it."

Julius drew a deep breath.

"I guess that settles it. She came as far as here, anyway. We'll make that pub our head-quarters, and raise hell round here until we find her. Somebody MUST have seen her."

Forthwith the campaign began. Tommy and Julius worked separately and together, but the result was the same. Nobody answering to Tuppence's description had been seen in the vicinity. They were baffled--but not discouraged. Finally they altered their tactics. Tuppence had certainly not remained long in the neighbourhood of the Moat House. That pointed to her having been overcome and carried away in a car. They renewed inquiries. Had anyone seen a car standing somewhere near the Moat House that day? Again they met with no success.

Julius wired to town for his own car, and they scoured the neighbourhood daily with unflagging zeal. A grey limousine on which they had set high hopes was traced to Harrogate, and turned out to be the property of a highly respectable maiden lady!

Each day saw them set out on a new quest. Julius was like a hound on the leash. He followed up the slenderest clue. Every car that had passed through the village on the fateful day was tracked down. He forced his way into country properties and submitted the owners of the motors to a searching cross-examination. His apologies were as thorough as his methods, and seldom failed in disarming the indignation of his victims; but, as day succeeded day, they were no nearer to discovering Tuppence's whereabouts. So well had the abduction been planned that the girl seemed literally to have vanished into thin air.

And another preoccupation was weighing on Tommy's mind.

"Do you know how long we've been here?" he asked one morning as they sat facing each other at breakfast. "A week! We're no nearer to finding Tuppence, and NEXT SUNDAY IS THE 29TH!"

"Shucks!" said Julius thoughtfully. "I'd almost forgotten about the 29th. I've been thinking of nothing but Tuppence."

"So have I. At least, I hadn't forgotten about the 29th, but it didn't seem to matter a damn in comparison to finding Tuppence. But to-day's the 23rd, and time's getting short. If we're ever going to get hold of her at all, we must do it before the 29th--her life won't be worth an hour's purchase afterwards. The hostage game will be played out by then. I'm beginning to feel that we've made a big mistake in the way we've set about this. We've wasted time and we're no forrader."

"I'm with you there. We've been a couple of mutts, who've bitten off a bigger bit than they can chew. I'm going to quit fooling right away!"

"What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. I'm going to do what we ought to have done a week ago. I'm going right back to London to put the case in the hands of your British police. We fancied ourselves as sleuths. Sleuths! It was a piece of damn-fool foolishness! I'm through! I've had enough of it. Scotland Yard for me!"

"You're right," said Tommy slowly. "I wish to God we'd gone there right away."

"Better late than never. We've been like a couple of babes playing 'Here we go round the Mulberry Bush.' Now I'm going right along to Scotland Yard to ask them to take me by the hand and show me the way I should go. I guess the professional always scores over the amateur in the end. Are you coming along with me?"

Tommy shook his head.

"What's the good? One of us is enough. I might as well stay here and nose round a bit longer. Something MIGHT turn up. One never knows."

"Sure thing. Well, so long. I'll be back in a couple of shakes with a few inspectors along. I shall tell them to pick out their brightest and best."

But the course of events was not to follow the plan Julius had laid down. Later in the day Tommy received a wire:

"Join me Manchester Midland Hotel. Important news--JULIUS."

At 7:30 that night Tommy alighted from a slow cross-country train. Julius was on the platform.

"Thought you'd come by this train if you weren't out when my wire arrived."

Tommy grasped him by the arm.

"What is it? Is Tuppence found?"

Julius shook his head.

"No. But I found this waiting in London. Just arrived."

He handed the telegraph form to the other. Tommy's eyes opened as he read:

"Jane Finn found. Come Manchester Midland Hotel immediately--PEEL
EDGERTON."

Julius took the form back and folded it up.

"Queer," he said thoughtfully. "I thought that lawyer chap had quit!"