

CHAPTER XXI. TOMMY MAKES A DISCOVERY

FOR a moment or two they stood staring at each other stupidly, dazed with the shock. Somehow, inexplicably, Mr. Brown had forestalled them. Tommy accepted defeat quietly. Not so Julius.

"How in tarnation did he get ahead of us? That's what beats me!" he ended up.

Tommy shook his head, and said dully:

"It accounts for the stitches being new. We might have guessed...."

"Never mind the darned stitches. How did he get ahead of us? We hustled all we knew. It's downright impossible for anyone to get here quicker than we did. And, anyway, how did he know? Do you reckon there was a dictaphone in Jane's room? I guess there must have been."

But Tommy's common sense pointed out objections.

"No one could have known beforehand that she was going to be in that house--much less that particular room."

"That's so," admitted Julius. "Then one of the nurses was a crook and listened at the door. How's that?"

"I don't see that it matters anyway," said Tommy wearily. "He may have found out some months ago, and removed the papers, then----No, by Jove, that won't wash! They'd have been published at once."

"Sure thing they would! No, some one's got ahead of us to-day by an hour or so. But how they did it gets my goat."

"I wish that chap Peel Edgerton had been with us," said Tommy thoughtfully.

"Why?" Julius stared. "The mischief was done when we came."

"Yes----" Tommy hesitated. He could not explain his own feeling--the illogical idea that the K.C.'s presence would somehow have averted the catastrophe. He reverted to his former point of view. "It's no good arguing about how it was done. The game's up. We've failed. There's only one thing for me to do."

"What's that?"

"Get back to London as soon as possible. Mr. Carter must be warned. It's only a matter of hours now before the blow falls. But, at any rate, he ought to know the worst."

The duty was an unpleasant one, but Tommy had no intention of shirking it. He must report his failure to Mr. Carter. After that his work was done. He took the midnight mail to London. Julius elected to stay the night at Holyhead.

Half an hour after arrival, haggard and pale, Tommy stood before his chief.

"I've come to report, sir. I've failed--failed badly."

Mr. Carter eyed him sharply.

"You mean that the treaty----"

"Is in the hands of Mr. Brown, sir."

"Ah!" said Mr. Carter quietly. The expression on his face did not change, but Tommy caught the flicker of despair in his eyes. It convinced him as nothing else had done that the outlook was hopeless.

"Well," said Mr. Carter after a minute or two, "we mustn't sag at the knees, I suppose. I'm glad to know definitely. We must do what we can."

Through Tommy's mind flashed the assurance: "It's hopeless, and he knows it's hopeless!"

The other looked up at him.

"Don't take it to heart, lad," he said kindly. "You did your best. You were up against one of the biggest brains of the century. And you came very near success. Remember that."

"Thank you, sir. It's awfully decent of you."

"I blame myself. I have been blaming myself ever since I heard this other news."

Something in his tone attracted Tommy's attention. A new fear gripped at his

heart.

"Is there--something more, sir?"

"I'm afraid so," said Mr. Carter gravely. He stretched out his hand to a sheet on the table.

"Tuppence----?" faltered Tommy.

"Read for yourself."

The typewritten words danced before his eyes. The description of a green toque, a coat with a handkerchief in the pocket marked P.L.C. He looked an agonized question at Mr. Carter. The latter replied to it:

"Washed up on the Yorkshire coast--near Ebury. I'm afraid--it looks very much like foul play."

"My God!" gasped Tommy. "TUPPENCE! Those devils--I'll never rest till I've got even with them! I'll hunt them down! I'll----"

The pity on Mr. Carter's face stopped him.

"I know what you feel like, my poor boy. But it's no good. You'll waste your strength uselessly. It may sound harsh, but my advice to you is: Cut your losses. Time's merciful. You'll forget."

"Forget Tuppence? Never!"

Mr. Carter shook his head.

"So you think now. Well, it won't bear thinking of--that brave little girl! I'm sorry about the whole business--confoundedly sorry."

Tommy came to himself with a start.

"I'm taking up your time, sir," he said with an effort. "There's no need for you to blame yourself. I dare say we were a couple of young fools to take on such a job. You warned us all right. But I wish to God I'd been the one to get it in the neck. Good-bye, sir."

Back at the Ritz, Tommy packed up his few belongings mechanically, his

thoughts far away. He was still bewildered by the introduction of tragedy into his cheerful commonplace existence. What fun they had had together, he and Tuppence! And now--oh, he couldn't believe it--it couldn't be true! TUPPENCE--DEAD! Little Tuppence, brimming over with life! It was a dream, a horrible dream. Nothing more.

They brought him a note, a few kind words of sympathy from Peel Edgerton, who had read the news in the paper. (There had been a large headline: EX-V.A.D. FEARED DROWNED.) The letter ended with the offer of a post on a ranch in the Argentine, where Sir James had considerable interests.

"Kind old beggar," muttered Tommy, as he flung it aside.

The door opened, and Julius burst in with his usual violence. He held an open newspaper in his hand.

"Say, what's all this? They seem to have got some fool idea about Tuppence."

"It's true," said Tommy quietly.

"You mean they've done her in?"

Tommy nodded.

"I suppose when they got the treaty she--wasn't any good to them any longer, and they were afraid to let her go."

"Well, I'm darned!" said Julius. "Little Tuppence. She sure was the pluckiest little girl----"

But suddenly something seemed to crack in Tommy's brain. He rose to his feet.

"Oh, get out! You don't really care, damn you! You asked her to marry you in your rotten cold-blooded way, but I LOVED her. I'd have given the soul out of my body to save her from harm. I'd have stood by without a word and let her marry you, because you could have given her the sort of time she ought to have had, and I was only a poor devil without a penny to bless himself with. But it wouldn't have been because I didn't care!"

"See here," began Julius temperately.

"Oh, go to the devil! I can't stand your coming here and talking about 'little

Tuppence.' Go and look after your cousin. Tuppence is my girl! I've always loved her, from the time we played together as kids. We grew up and it was just the same. I shall never forget when I was in hospital, and she came in in that ridiculous cap and apron! It was like a miracle to see the girl I loved turn up in a nurse's kit----"

But Julius interrupted him.

"A nurse's kit! Gee whiz! I must be going to Colney Hatch! I could swear I've seen Jane in a nurse's cap too. And that's plumb impossible! No, by gum, I've got it! It was her I saw talking to Whittington at that nursing home in Bournemouth. She wasn't a patient there! She was a nurse!"

"I dare say," said Tommy angrily, "she's probably been in with them from the start. I shouldn't wonder if she stole those papers from Danvers to begin with."

"I'm darned if she did!" shouted Julius. "She's my cousin, and as patriotic a girl as ever stepped."

"I don't care a damn what she is, but get out of here!" retorted Tommy also at the top of his voice.

The young men were on the point of coming to blows. But suddenly, with an almost magical abruptness, Julius's anger abated.

"All right, son," he said quietly, "I'm going. I don't blame you any for what you've been saying. It's mighty lucky you did say it. I've been the most almighty blithering darned idiot that it's possible to imagine. Calm down"--Tommy had made an impatient gesture--"I'm going right away now--going to the London and North Western Railway depot, if you want to know."

"I don't care a damn where you're going," growled Tommy.

As the door closed behind Julius, he returned to his suit-case.

"That's the lot," he murmured, and rang the bell.

"Take my luggage down."

"Yes, sir. Going away, sir?"

"I'm going to the devil," said Tommy, regardless of the menial's feelings.

That functionary, however, merely replied respectfully:

"Yes, sir. Shall I call a taxi?"

Tommy nodded.

Where was he going? He hadn't the faintest idea. Beyond a fixed determination to get even with Mr. Brown he had no plans. He re-read Sir James's letter, and shook his head. Tuppence must be avenged. Still, it was kind of the old fellow.

"Better answer it, I suppose." He went across to the writing-table. With the usual perversity of bedroom stationery, there were innumerable envelopes and no paper. He rang. No one came. Tommy fumed at the delay. Then he remembered that there was a good supply in Julius's sitting-room. The American had announced his immediate departure, there would be no fear of running up against him. Besides, he wouldn't mind if he did. He was beginning to be rather ashamed of the things he had said. Old Julius had taken them jolly well. He'd apologize if he found him there.

But the room was deserted. Tommy walked across to the writing-table, and opened the middle drawer. A photograph, carelessly thrust in face upwards, caught his eye. For a moment he stood rooted to the ground. Then he took it out, shut the drawer, walked slowly over to an arm-chair, and sat down still staring at the photograph in his hand.

What on earth was a photograph of the French girl Annette doing in Julius Hersheimer's writing-table?