

CHAPTER XXII. IN DOWNING STREET

THE Prime Minister tapped the desk in front of him with nervous fingers. His face was worn and harassed. He took up his conversation with Mr. Carter at the point it had broken off. "I don't understand," he said. "Do you really mean that things are not so desperate after all?"

"So this lad seems to think."

"Let's have a look at his letter again."

Mr. Carter handed it over. It was written in a sprawling boyish hand.

"DEAR MR. CARTER,

"Something's turned up that has given me a jar. Of course I may be simply making an awful ass of myself, but I don't think so. If my conclusions are right, that girl at Manchester was just a plant. The whole thing was prearranged, sham packet and all, with the object of making us think the game was up--therefore I fancy that we must have been pretty hot on the scent.

"I think I know who the real Jane Finn is, and I've even got an idea where the papers are. That last's only a guess, of course, but I've a sort of feeling it'll turn out right. Anyhow, I enclose it in a sealed envelope for what it's worth. I'm going to ask you not to open it until the very last moment, midnight on the 28th, in fact. You'll understand why in a minute. You see, I've figured it out that those things of Tuppence's are a plant too, and she's no more drowned than I am. The way I reason is this: as a last chance they'll let Jane Finn escape in the hope that she's been shamming this memory stunt, and that once she thinks she's free she'll go right away to the cache. Of course it's an awful risk for them to take, because she knows all about them--but they're pretty desperate to get hold of that treaty. **BUT IF THEY KNOW THAT THE PAPERS HAVE BEEN RECOVERED BY US**, neither of those two girls' lives will be worth an hour's purchase. I must try and get hold of Tuppence before Jane escapes.

"I want a repeat of that telegram that was sent to Tuppence at the Ritz. Sir James Peel Edgerton said you would be able to manage that for me. He's frightfully clever.

"One last thing--please have that house in Soho watched day and night.

"Yours, etc.,

"THOMAS BERESFORD."

The Prime Minister looked up.

"The enclosure?"

Mr. Carter smiled dryly.

"In the vaults of the Bank. I am taking no chances."

"You don't think"--the Prime Minister hesitated a minute--"that it would be better to open it now? Surely we ought to secure the document, that is, provided the young man's guess turns out to be correct, at once. We can keep the fact of having done so quite secret."

"Can we? I'm not so sure. There are spies all round us. Once it's known I wouldn't give that"--he snapped his fingers--"for the life of those two girls. No, the boy trusted me, and I shan't let him down."

"Well, well, we must leave it at that, then. What's he like, this lad?"

"Outwardly, he's an ordinary clean-limbed, rather block-headed young Englishman. Slow in his mental processes. On the other hand, it's quite impossible to lead him astray through his imagination. He hasn't got any--so he's difficult to deceive. He worries things out slowly, and once he's got hold of anything he doesn't let go. The little lady's quite different. More intuition and less common sense. They make a pretty pair working together. Pace and stamina."

"He seems confident," mused the Prime Minister.

"Yes, and that's what gives me hope. He's the kind of diffident youth who would have to be VERY sure before he ventured an opinion at all."

A half smile came to the other's lips.

"And it is this--boy who will defeat the master criminal of our time?"

"This--boy, as you say! But I sometimes fancy I see a shadow behind."

"You mean?"

"Peel Edgerton."

"Peel Edgerton?" said the Prime Minister in astonishment.

"Yes. I see his hand in THIS." He struck the open letter. "He's there--working in the dark, silently, unobtrusively. I've always felt that if anyone was to run Mr. Brown to earth, Peel Edgerton would be the man. I tell you he's on the case now, but doesn't want it known. By the way, I got rather an odd request from him the other day."

"Yes?"

"He sent me a cutting from some American paper. It referred to a man's body found near the docks in New York about three weeks ago. He asked me to collect any information on the subject I could."

"Well?"

Carter shrugged his shoulders.

"I couldn't get much. Young fellow about thirty-five--poorly dressed--face very badly disfigured. He was never identified."

"And you fancy that the two matters are connected in some way?"

"Somehow I do. I may be wrong, of course."

There was a pause, then Mr. Carter continued:

"I asked him to come round here. Not that we'll get anything out of him he doesn't want to tell. His legal instincts are too strong. But there's no doubt he can throw light on one or two obscure points in young Beresford's letter. Ah, here he is!"

The two men rose to greet the new-comer. A half whimsical thought flashed across the Premier's mind. "My successor, perhaps!"

"We've had a letter from young Beresford," said Mr. Carter, coming to the point at once. "You've seen him, I suppose?"

"You suppose wrong," said the lawyer.

"Oh!" Mr. Carter was a little nonplussed.

Sir James smiled, and stroked his chin.

"He rang me up," he volunteered.

"Would you have any objection to telling us exactly what passed between you?"

"Not at all. He thanked me for a certain letter which I had written to him--as a matter of fact, I had offered him a job. Then he reminded me of something I had said to him at Manchester respecting that bogus telegram which lured Miss Cowley away. I asked him if anything untoward had occurred. He said it had--that in a drawer in Mr. Hersheimer's room he had discovered a photograph." The lawyer paused, then continued: "I asked him if the photograph bore the name and address of a Californian photographer. He replied: 'You're on to it, sir. It had.' Then he went on to tell me something I DIDN'T know. The original of that photograph was the French girl, Annette, who saved his life."

"What?"

"Exactly. I asked the young man with some curiosity what he had done with the photograph. He replied that he had put it back where he found it." The lawyer paused again. "That was good, you know--distinctly good. He can use his brains, that young fellow. I congratulated him. The discovery was a providential one. Of course, from the moment that the girl in Manchester was proved to be a plant everything was altered. Young Beresford saw that for himself without my having to tell it him. But he felt he couldn't trust his judgment on the subject of Miss Cowley. Did I think she was alive? I told him, duly weighing the evidence, that there was a very decided chance in favour of it. That brought us back to the telegram."

"Yes?"

"I advised him to apply to you for a copy of the original wire. It had occurred to me as probable that, after Miss Cowley flung it on the floor, certain words might have been erased and altered with the express intention of setting searchers on a false trail."

Carter nodded. He took a sheet from his pocket, and read aloud:

"Come at once, Astley Priors, Gatehouse, Kent. Great developments--TOMMY."

"Very simple," said Sir James, "and very ingenious. Just a few words to alter, and the thing was done. And the one important clue they overlooked."

"What was that?"

"The page-boy's statement that Miss Cowley drove to Charing Cross. They were so sure of themselves that they took it for granted he had made a mistake."

"Then young Beresford is now?"

"At Gatehouse, Kent, unless I am much mistaken."

Mr. Carter looked at him curiously.

"I rather wonder you're not there too, Peel Edgerton?"

"Ah, I'm busy on a case."

"I thought you were on your holiday?"

"Oh, I've not been briefed. Perhaps it would be more correct to say I'm preparing a case. Any more facts about that American chap for me?"

"I'm afraid not. Is it important to find out who he was?"

"Oh, I know who he was," said Sir James easily. "I can't prove it yet--but I know."

The other two asked no questions. They had an instinct that it would be mere waste of breath.

"But what I don't understand," said the Prime-Minister suddenly, "is how that photograph came to be in Mr. Hersheimer's drawer?"

"Perhaps it never left it," suggested the lawyer gently.

"But the bogus inspector? Inspector Brown?"

"Ah!" said Sir James thoughtfully. He rose to his feet. "I mustn't keep you. Go on with the affairs of the nation. I must get back to--my case."

Two days later Julius Hersheimer returned from Manchester. A note from

Tommy lay on his table:

"DEAR HERSHEIMMER,

"Sorry I lost my temper. In case I don't see you again, good-bye. I've been offered a job in the Argentine, and might as well take it.

"Yours,

"TOMMY BERESFORD."

A peculiar smile lingered for a moment on Julius's face. He threw the letter into the waste-paper basket.

"The darned fool!" he murmured.