

### **CHAPTER XXIII. A RACE AGAINST TIME**

AFTER ringing up Sir James, Tommy's next procedure was to make a call at South Audley Mansions. He found Albert discharging his professional duties, and introduced himself without more ado as a friend of Tuppence's. Albert unbent immediately.

"Things has been very quiet here lately," he said wistfully. "Hope the young lady's keeping well, sir?"

"That's just the point, Albert. She's disappeared."

"You don't mean as the crooks have got her?"

"They have."

"In the Underworld?"

"No, dash it all, in this world!"

"It's a h'expression, sir," explained Albert. "At the pictures the crooks always have a restoorant in the Underworld. But do you think as they've done her in, sir?"

"I hope not. By the way, have you by any chance an aunt, a cousin, a grandmother, or any other suitable female relation who might be represented as being likely to kick the bucket?"

A delighted grin spread slowly over Albert's countenance.

"I'm on, sir. My poor aunt what lives in the country has been mortal bad for a long time, and she's asking for me with her dying breath."

Tommy nodded approval.

"Can you report this in the proper quarter and meet me at Charing Cross in an hour's time?"

"I'll be there, sir. You can count on me."

As Tommy had judged, the faithful Albert proved an invaluable ally. The two took

up their quarters at the inn in Gatehouse. To Albert fell the task of collecting information. There was no difficulty about it.

Astley Priors was the property of a Dr. Adams. The doctor no longer practiced, had retired, the landlord believed, but he took a few private patients--here the good fellow tapped his forehead knowingly--"balmy ones! You understand!" The doctor was a popular figure in the village, subscribed freely to all the local sports--"a very pleasant, affable gentleman." Been there long? Oh, a matter of ten years or so--might be longer. Scientific gentleman, he was. Professors and people often came down from town to see him. Anyway, it was a gay house, always visitors.

In the face of all this volubility, Tommy felt doubts. Was it possible that this genial, well-known figure could be in reality a dangerous criminal? His life seemed so open and aboveboard. No hint of sinister doings. Suppose it was all a gigantic mistake? Tommy felt a cold chill at the thought.

Then he remembered the private patients--"balmy ones." He inquired carefully if there was a young lady amongst them, describing Tuppence. But nothing much seemed to be known about the patients--they were seldom seen outside the grounds. A guarded description of Annette also failed to provoke recognition.

Astley Priors was a pleasant red-brick edifice, surrounded by well-wooded grounds which effectually shielded the house from observation from the road.

On the first evening Tommy, accompanied by Albert, explored the grounds. Owing to Albert's insistence they dragged themselves along painfully on their stomachs, thereby producing a great deal more noise than if they had stood upright. In any case, these precautions were totally unnecessary. The grounds, like those of any other private house after nightfall, seemed untenanted. Tommy had imagined a possible fierce watchdog. Albert's fancy ran to a puma, or a tame cobra. But they reached a shrubbery near the house quite unmolested.

The blinds of the dining-room window were up. There was a large company assembled round the table. The port was passing from hand to hand. It seemed a normal, pleasant company. Through the open window scraps of conversation floated out disjointedly on the night air. It was a heated discussion on county cricket!

Again Tommy felt that cold chill of uncertainty. It seemed impossible to believe that these people were other than they seemed. Had he been fooled once more? The fair-bearded, spectacled gentleman who sat at the head of the table looked singularly honest and normal.

Tommy slept badly that night. The following morning the indefatigable Albert, having cemented an alliance with the greengrocer's boy, took the latter's place and ingratiated himself with the cook at Malthouse. He returned with the information that she was undoubtedly "one of the crooks," but Tommy mistrusted the vividness of his imagination. Questioned, he could adduce nothing in support of his statement except his own opinion that she wasn't the usual kind. You could see that at a glance.

The substitution being repeated (much to the pecuniary advantage of the real greengrocer's boy) on the following day, Albert brought back the first piece of hopeful news. There WAS a French young lady staying in the house. Tommy put his doubts aside. Here was confirmation of his theory. But time pressed. To-day was the 27th. The 29th was the much-talked-of "Labour Day," about which all sorts of rumours were running riot. Newspapers were getting agitated. Sensational hints of a Labour coup d'etat were freely reported. The Government said nothing. It knew and was prepared. There were rumours of dissension among the Labour leaders. They were not of one mind. The more far-seeing among them realized that what they proposed might well be a death-blow to the England that at heart they loved. They shrank from the starvation and misery a general strike would entail, and were willing to meet the Government half-way. But behind them were subtle, insistent forces at work, urging the memories of old wrongs, deprecating the weakness of half-and-half measures, fomenting misunderstandings.

Tommy felt that, thanks to Mr. Carter, he understood the position fairly accurately. With the fatal document in the hands of Mr. Brown, public opinion would swing to the side of the Labour extremists and revolutionists. Failing that, the battle was an even chance. The Government with a loyal army and police force behind them might win--but at a cost of great suffering. But Tommy nourished another and a preposterous dream. With Mr. Brown unmasked and captured he believed, rightly or wrongly, that the whole organization would crumble ignominiously and instantaneously. The strange permeating influence of the unseen chief held it together. Without him, Tommy believed an instant panic would set in; and, the honest men left to themselves, an eleventh-hour reconciliation would be possible.

"This is a one-man show," said Tommy to himself. "The thing to do is to get hold of the man."

It was partly in furtherance of this ambitious design that he had requested Mr. Carter not to open the sealed envelope. The draft treaty was Tommy's bait. Every

now and then he was aghast at his own presumption. How dared he think that he had discovered what so many wiser and clever men had overlooked? Nevertheless, he stuck tenaciously to his idea.

That evening he and Albert once more penetrated the grounds of Astley Priors. Tommy's ambition was somehow or other to gain admission to the house itself. As they approached cautiously, Tommy gave a sudden gasp.

On the second floor window some one standing between the window and the light in the room threw a silhouette on the blind. It was one Tommy would have recognized anywhere! Tuppence was in that house!

He clutched Albert by the shoulder.

"Stay here! When I begin to sing, watch that window."

He retreated hastily to a position on the main drive, and began in a deep roar, coupled with an unsteady gait, the following ditty:

I am a Soldier            A jolly British Soldier;    You can see that I'm a Soldier  
by my feet...

It had been a favourite on the gramophone in Tuppence's hospital days. He did not doubt but that she would recognize it and draw her own conclusions. Tommy had not a note of music in his voice, but his lungs were excellent. The noise he produced was terrific.

Presently an unimpeachable butler, accompanied by an equally unimpeachable footman, issued from the front door. The butler remonstrated with him. Tommy continued to sing, addressing the butler affectionately as "dear old whiskers." The footman took him by one arm, the butler by the other. They ran him down the drive, and neatly out of the gate. The butler threatened him with the police if he intruded again. It was beautifully done--soberly and with perfect decorum. Anyone would have sworn that the butler was a real butler, the footman a real footman--only, as it happened, the butler was Whittington!

Tommy retired to the inn and waited for Albert's return. At last that worthy made his appearance.

"Well?" cried Tommy eagerly.

"It's all right. While they was a-running of you out the window opened, and

something was chucked out." He handed a scrap of paper to Tommy. "It was wrapped round a letterweight."

On the paper were scrawled three words: "To-morrow--same time."

"Good egg!" cried Tommy. "We're getting going."

"I wrote a message on a piece of paper, wrapped it round a stone, and chucked it through the window," continued Albert breathlessly.

Tommy groaned.

"Your zeal will be the undoing of us, Albert. What did you say?"

"Said we was a-staying at the inn. If she could get away, to come there and croak like a frog."

"She'll know that's you," said Tommy with a sigh of relief. "Your imagination runs away with you, you know, Albert. Why, you wouldn't recognize a frog croaking if you heard it."

Albert looked rather crest-fallen.

"Cheer up," said Tommy. "No harm done. That butler's an old friend of mine--I bet he knew who I was, though he didn't let on. It's not their game to show suspicion. That's why we've found it fairly plain sailing. They don't want to discourage me altogether. On the other hand, they don't want to make it too easy. I'm a pawn in their game, Albert, that's what I am. You see, if the spider lets the fly walk out too easily, the fly might suspect it was a put-up job. Hence the usefulness of that promising youth, Mr. T. Beresford, who's blundered in just at the right moment for them. But later, Mr. T. Beresford had better look out!"

Tommy retired for the night in a state of some elation. He had elaborated a careful plan for the following evening. He felt sure that the inhabitants of Astley Priors would not interfere with him up to a certain point. It was after that that Tommy proposed to give them a surprise.

About twelve o'clock, however, his calm was rudely shaken. He was told that some one was demanding him in the bar. The applicant proved to be a rude-looking carter well coated with mud.

"Well, my good fellow, what is it?" asked Tommy.

"Might this be for you, sir?" The carter held out a very dirty folded note, on the outside of which was written: "Take this to the gentleman at the inn near Astley Priors. He will give you ten shillings."

The handwriting was Tuppence's. Tommy appreciated her quick-wittedness in realizing that he might be staying at the inn under an assumed name. He snatched at it.

"That's all right."

The man withheld it.

"What about my ten shillings?"

Tommy hastily produced a ten-shilling note, and the man relinquished his find. Tommy unfastened it.

"DEAR TOMMY,

"I knew it was you last night. Don't go this evening. They'll be lying in wait for you. They're taking us away this morning. I heard something about Wales-- Holyhead, I think. I'll drop this on the road if I get a chance. Annette told me how you'd escaped. Buck up.

"Yours,

"TWOPENCE."

Tommy raised a shout for Albert before he had even finished perusing this characteristic epistle.

"Pack my bag! We're off!"

"Yes, sir." The boots of Albert could be heard racing upstairs. Holyhead? Did that mean that, after all---Tommy was puzzled. He read on slowly.

The boots of Albert continued to be active on the floor above.

Suddenly a second shout came from below.

"Albert! I'm a damned fool! Unpack that bag!"

"Yes, sir."

Tommy smoothed out the note thoughtfully.

"Yes, a damned fool," he said softly. "But so's some one else! And at last I know who it is!"