

CHAPTER XXV. JANE'S STORY

HER arm through Jane's, dragging her along, Tuppence reached the station. Her quick ears caught the sound of the approaching train.

"Hurry up," she panted, "or we'll miss it."

They arrived on the platform just as the train came to a standstill. Tuppence opened the door of an empty first-class compartment, and the two girls sank down breathless on the padded seats.

A man looked in, then passed on to the next carriage. Jane started nervously. Her eyes dilated with terror. She looked questioningly at Tuppence.

"Is he one of them, do you think?" she breathed.

Tuppence shook her head.

"No, no. It's all right." She took Jane's hand in hers. "Tommy wouldn't have told us to do this unless he was sure we'd be all right."

"But he doesn't know them as I do!" The girl shivered. "You can't understand. Five years! Five long years! Sometimes I thought I should go mad."

"Never mind. It's all over."

"Is it?"

The train was moving now, speeding through the night at a gradually increasing rate. Suddenly Jane Finn started up.

"What was that? I thought I saw a face--looking in through the window."

"No, there's nothing. See." Tuppence went to the window, and lifting the strap let the pane down.

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

The other seemed to feel some excuse was necessary:

"I guess I'm acting like a frightened rabbit, but I can't help it. If they caught me now they'd----" Her eyes opened wide and staring.

"DON'T!" implored Tuppence. "Lie back, and DON'T THINK. You can be quite sure that Tommy wouldn't have said it was safe if it wasn't."

"My cousin didn't think so. He didn't want us to do this."

"No," said Tuppence, rather embarrassed.

"What are you thinking of?" said Jane sharply.

"Why?"

"Your voice was so--queer!"

"I WAS thinking of something," confessed Tuppence. "But I don't want to tell you--not now. I may be wrong, but I don't think so. It's just an idea that came into my head a long time ago. Tommy's got it too--I'm almost sure he has. But don't YOU worry--there'll be time enough for that later. And it mayn't be so at all! Do what I tell you--lie back and don't think of anything."

"I'll try." The long lashes drooped over the hazel eyes.

Tuppence, for her part, sat bolt upright--much in the attitude of a watchful terrier on guard. In spite of herself she was nervous. Her eyes flashed continually from one window to the other. She noted the exact position of the communication cord. What it was that she feared, she would have been hard put to it to say. But in her own mind she was far from feeling the confidence displayed in her words. Not that she disbelieved in Tommy, but occasionally she was shaken with doubts as to whether anyone so simple and honest as he was could ever be a match for the fiendish subtlety of the arch-criminal.

If they once reached Sir James Peel Edgerton in safety, all would be well. But would they reach him? Would not the silent forces of Mr. Brown already be assembling against them? Even that last picture of Tommy, revolver in hand, failed to comfort her. By now he might be overpowered, borne down by sheer force of numbers.... Tuppence mapped out her plan of campaign.

As the train at length drew slowly into Charing Cross, Jane Finn sat up with a

start.

"Have we arrived? I never thought we should!"

"Oh, I thought we'd get to London all right. If there's going to be any fun, now is when it will begin. Quick, get out. We'll nip into a taxi."

In another minute they were passing the barrier, had paid the necessary fares, and were stepping into a taxi.

"King's Cross," directed Tuppence. Then she gave a jump. A man looked in at the window, just as they started. She was almost certain it was the same man who had got into the carriage next to them. She had a horrible feeling of being slowly hemmed in on every side.

"You see," she explained to Jane, "if they think we're going to Sir James, this will put them off the scent. Now they'll imagine we're going to Mr. Carter. His country place is north of London somewhere."

Crossing Holborn there was a block, and the taxi was held up. This was what Tuppence had been waiting for.

"Quick," she whispered. "Open the right-hand door!"

The two girls stepped out into the traffic. Two minutes later they were seated in another taxi and were retracing their steps, this time direct to Carlton House Terrace.

"There," said Tuppence, with great satisfaction, "this ought to do them. I can't help thinking that I'm really rather clever! How that other taxi man will swear! But I took his number, and I'll send him a postal order to-morrow, so that he won't lose by it if he happens to be genuine. What's this thing swerving----Oh!"

There was a grinding noise and a bump. Another taxi had collided with them.

In a flash Tuppence was out on the pavement. A policeman was approaching. Before he arrived Tuppence had handed the driver five shillings, and she and Jane had merged themselves in the crowd.

"It's only a step or two now," said Tuppence breathlessly. The accident had taken place in Trafalgar Square.

"Do you think the collision was an accident, or done deliberately?"

"I don't know. It might have been either."

Hand-in-hand, the two girls hurried along.

"It may be my fancy," said Tuppence suddenly, "but I feel as though there was some one behind us."

"Hurry!" murmured the other. "Oh, hurry!"

They were now at the corner of Carlton House Terrace, and their spirits lightened. Suddenly a large and apparently intoxicated man barred their way.

"Good evening, ladies," he hiccupped. "Whither away so fast?"

"Let us pass, please," said Tuppence imperiously.

"Just a word with your pretty friend here." He stretched out an unsteady hand, and clutched Jane by the shoulder. Tuppence heard other footsteps behind. She did not pause to ascertain whether they were friends or foes. Lowering her head, she repeated a manoeuvre of childish days, and butted their aggressor full in the capacious middle. The success of these unsportsmanlike tactics was immediate. The man sat down abruptly on the pavement. Tuppence and Jane took to their heels. The house they sought was some way down. Other footsteps echoed behind them. Their breath was coming in choking gasps as they reached Sir James's door. Tuppence seized the bell and Jane the knocker.

The man who had stopped them reached the foot of the steps. For a moment he hesitated, and as he did so the door opened. They fell into the hall together. Sir James came forward from the library door.

"Hullo! What's this?"

He stepped forward, and put his arm round Jane as she swayed uncertainly. He half carried her into the library, and laid her on the leather couch. From a tantalus on the table he poured out a few drops of brandy, and forced her to drink them. With a sigh she sat up, her eyes still wild and frightened.

"It's all right. Don't be afraid, my child. You're quite safe."

Her breath came more normally, and the colour was returning to her cheeks. Sir

James looked at Tuppence quizzically.

"So you're not dead, Miss Tuppence, any more than that Tommy boy of yours was!"

"The Young Adventurers take a lot of killing," boasted Tuppence.

"So it seems," said Sir James dryly. "Am I right in thinking that the joint venture has ended in success, and that this"--he turned to the girl on the couch--"is Miss Jane Finn?"

Jane sat up.

"Yes," she said quietly, "I am Jane Finn. I have a lot to tell you."

"When you are stronger----"

"No--now!" Her voice rose a little. "I shall feel safer when I have told everything."

"As you please," said the lawyer.

He sat down in one of the big arm-chairs facing the couch. In a low voice Jane began her story.

"I came over on the Lusitania to take up a post in Paris. I was fearfully keen about the war, and just dying to help somehow or other. I had been studying French, and my teacher said they were wanting help in a hospital in Paris, so I wrote and offered my services, and they were accepted. I hadn't got any folk of my own, so it made it easy to arrange things.

"When the Lusitania was torpedoed, a man came up to me. I'd noticed him more than once--and I'd figured it out in my own mind that he was afraid of somebody or something. He asked me if I was a patriotic American, and told me he was carrying papers which were just life or death to the Allies. He asked me to take charge of them. I was to watch for an advertisement in the Times. If it didn't appear, I was to take them to the American Ambassador.

"Most of what followed seems like a nightmare still. I see it in my dreams sometimes.... I'll hurry over that part. Mr. Danvers had told me to watch out. He might have been shadowed from New York, but he didn't think so. At first I had no suspicions, but on the boat to Holyhead I began to get uneasy. There was one woman who had been very keen to look after me, and chum up with me

generally--a Mrs. Vandemeyer. At first I'd been only grateful to her for being so kind to me; but all the time I felt there was something about her I didn't like, and on the Irish boat I saw her talking to some queer-looking men, and from the way they looked I saw that they were talking about me. I remembered that she'd been quite near me on the Lusitania when Mr. Danvers gave me the packet, and before that she'd tried to talk to him once or twice. I began to get scared, but I didn't quite see what to do.

"I had a wild idea of stopping at Holyhead, and not going on to London that day, but I soon saw that that would be plumb foolishness. The only thing was to act as though I'd noticed nothing, and hope for the best. I couldn't see how they could get me if I was on my guard. One thing I'd done already as a precaution--ripped open the oilskin packet and substituted blank paper, and then sewn it up again. So, if anyone did manage to rob me of it, it wouldn't matter.

"What to do with the real thing worried me no end. Finally I opened it out flat--there were only two sheets--and laid it between two of the advertisement pages of a magazine. I stuck the two pages together round the edge with some gum off an envelope. I carried the magazine carelessly stuffed into the pocket of my ulster.

"At Holyhead I tried to get into a carriage with people that looked all right, but in a queer way there seemed always to be a crowd round me shoving and pushing me just the way I didn't want to go. There was something uncanny and frightening about it. In the end I found myself in a carriage with Mrs. Vandemeyer after all. I went out into the corridor, but all the other carriages were full, so I had to go back and sit down. I consoled myself with the thought that there were other people in the carriage--there was quite a nice-looking man and his wife sitting just opposite. So I felt almost happy about it until just outside London. I had leaned back and closed my eyes. I guess they thought I was asleep, but my eyes weren't quite shut, and suddenly I saw the nice-looking man get something out of his bag and hand it to Mrs. Vandemeyer, and as he did so he WINKED....

"I can't tell you how that wink sort of froze me through and through. My only thought was to get out in the corridor as quick as ever I could. I got up, trying to look natural and easy. Perhaps they saw something--I don't know--but suddenly Mrs. Vandemeyer said 'Now,' and flung something over my nose and mouth as I tried to scream. At the same moment I felt a terrific blow on the back of my head...."

She shuddered. Sir James murmured something sympathetically. In a minute she resumed:

"I don't know how long it was before I came back to consciousness. I felt very ill and sick. I was lying on a dirty bed. There was a screen round it, but I could hear two people talking in the room. Mrs. Vandemeyer was one of them. I tried to listen, but at first I couldn't take much in. When at last I did begin to grasp what was going on--I was just terrified! I wonder I didn't scream right out there and then.

"They hadn't found the papers. They'd got the oilskin packet with the blanks, and they were just mad! They didn't know whether I'd changed the papers, or whether Danvers had been carrying a dummy message, while the real one was sent another way. They spoke of"--she closed her eyes--"torturing me to find out!

"I'd never known what fear--really sickening fear--was before! Once they came to look at me. I shut my eyes and pretended to be still unconscious, but I was afraid they'd hear the beating of my heart. However, they went away again. I began thinking madly. What could I do? I knew I wouldn't be able to stand up against torture very long.

"Suddenly something put the thought of loss of memory into my head. The subject had always interested me, and I'd read an awful lot about it. I had the whole thing at my finger-tips. If only I could succeed in carrying the bluff through, it might save me. I said a prayer, and drew a long breath. Then I opened my eyes and started babbling in FRENCH!

"Mrs. Vandemeyer came round the screen at once. Her face was so wicked I nearly died, but I smiled up at her doubtfully, and asked her in French where I was.

"It puzzled her, I could see. She called the man she had been talking to. He stood by the screen with his face in shadow. He spoke to me in French. His voice was very ordinary and quiet, but somehow, I don't know why, he scared me worse than the woman. I felt he'd seen right through me, but I went on playing my part. I asked again where I was, and then went on that there was something I MUST remember--MUST remember--only for the moment it was all gone. I worked myself up to be more and more distressed. He asked me my name. I said I didn't know--that I couldn't remember anything at all.

"Suddenly he caught my wrist, and began twisting it. The pain was awful. I screamed. He went on. I screamed and screamed, but I managed to shriek out things in French. I don't know how long I could have gone on, but luckily I fainted. The last thing I heard was his voice saying: 'That's not bluff! Anyway, a kid of her age wouldn't know enough.' I guess he forgot American girls are older

for their age than English ones, and take more interest in scientific subjects.

"When I came to, Mrs. Vandemeyer was sweet as honey to me. She'd had her orders, I guess. She spoke to me in French--told me I'd had a shock and been very ill. I should be better soon. I pretended to be rather dazed--murmured something about the 'doctor' having hurt my wrist. She looked relieved when I said that.

"By and by she went out of the room altogether. I was suspicious still, and lay quite quiet for some time. In the end, however, I got up and walked round the room, examining it. I thought that even if anyone WAS watching me from somewhere, it would seem natural enough under the circumstances. It was a squalid, dirty place. There were no windows, which seemed queer. I guessed the door would be locked, but I didn't try it. There were some battered old pictures on the walls, representing scenes from Faust."

Jane's two listeners gave a simultaneous "Ah!" The girl nodded.

"Yes--it was the place in Soho where Mr. Beresford was imprisoned. Of course, at the time I didn't even know if I was in London. One thing was worrying me dreadfully, but my heart gave a great throb of relief when I saw my ulster lying carelessly over the back of a chair. AND THE MAGAZINE WAS STILL ROLLED UP IN THE POCKET!

"If only I could be certain that I was not being overlooked! I looked carefully round the walls. There didn't seem to be a peep-hole of any kind--nevertheless I felt kind of sure there must be. All of a sudden I sat down on the edge of the table, and put my face in my hands, sobbing out a 'Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!' I've got very sharp ears. I distinctly heard the rustle of a dress, and slight creak. That was enough for me. I was being watched!

"I lay down on the bed again, and by and by Mrs. Vandemeyer brought me some supper. She was still sweet as they make them. I guess she'd been told to win my confidence. Presently she produced the oilskin packet, and asked me if I recognized it, watching me like a lynx all the time.

"I took it and turned it over in a puzzled sort of way. Then I shook my head. I said that I felt I OUGHT to remember something about it, that it was just as though it was all coming back, and then, before I could get hold of it, it went again. Then she told me that I was her niece, and that I was to call her 'Aunt Rita.' I did obediently, and she told me not to worry--my memory would soon come back.

"That was an awful night. I'd made my plan whilst I was waiting for her. The papers were safe so far, but I couldn't take the risk of leaving them there any longer. They might throw that magazine away any minute. I lay awake waiting until I judged it must be about two o'clock in the morning. Then I got up as softly as I could, and felt in the dark along the left-hand wall. Very gently, I unhooked one of the pictures from its nail--Marguerite with her casket of jewels. I crept over to my coat and took out the magazine, and an odd envelope or two that I had shoved in. Then I went to the washstand, and damped the brown paper at the back of the picture all round. Presently I was able to pull it away. I had already torn out the two stuck-together pages from the magazine, and now I slipped them with their precious enclosure between the picture and its brown paper backing. A little gum from the envelopes helped me to stick the latter up again. No one would dream the picture had ever been tampered with. I rehung it on the wall, put the magazine back in my coat pocket, and crept back to bed. I was pleased with my hiding-place. They'd never think of pulling to pieces one of their own pictures. I hoped that they'd come to the conclusion that Danvers had been carrying a dummy all along, and that, in the end, they'd let me go.

"As a matter of fact, I guess that's what they did think at first, and, in a way, it was dangerous for me. I learnt afterwards that they nearly did away with me then and there--there was never much chance of their 'letting me go'--but the first man, who was the boss, preferred to keep me alive on the chance of my having hidden them, and being able to tell where if I recovered my memory. They watched me constantly for weeks. Sometimes they'd ask me questions by the hour--I guess there was nothing they didn't know about the third degree!--but somehow I managed to hold my own. The strain of it was awful, though...

"They took me back to Ireland, and over every step of the Journey again, in case I'd hidden it somewhere en route. Mrs. Vandemeyer and another woman never left me for a moment. They spoke of me as a young relative of Mrs. Vandemeyer's whose mind was affected by the shock of the Lusitania. There was no one I could appeal to for help without giving myself away to THEM, and if I risked it and failed--and Mrs. Vandemeyer looked so rich, and so beautifully dressed, that I felt convinced they'd take her word against mine, and think it was part of my mental trouble to think myself 'persecuted'--I felt that the horrors in store for me would be too awful once they knew I'd been only shamming."

Sir James nodded comprehendingly.

"Mrs. Vandemeyer was a woman of great personality. With that and her social position she would have had little difficulty in imposing her point of view in preference to yours. Your sensational accusations against her would not easily

have found credence."

"That's what I thought. It ended in my being sent to a sanatorium at Bournemouth. I couldn't make up my mind at first whether it was a sham affair or genuine. A hospital nurse had charge of me. I was a special patient. She seemed so nice and normal that at last I determined to confide in her. A merciful providence just saved me in time from falling into the trap. My door happened to be ajar, and I heard her talking to some one in the passage. SHE WAS ONE OF THEM! They still fancied it might be a bluff on my part, and she was put in charge of me to make sure! After that, my nerve went completely. I dared trust nobody.

"I think I almost hypnotized myself. After a while, I almost forgot that I was really Jane Finn. I was so bent on playing the part of Janet Vandemeyer that my nerves began to play me tricks. I became really ill--for months I sank into a sort of stupor. I felt sure I should die soon, and that nothing really mattered. A sane person shut up in a lunatic asylum often ends by becoming insane, they say. I guess I was like that. Playing my part had become second nature to me. I wasn't even unhappy in the end--just apathetic. Nothing seemed to matter. And the years went on.

"And then suddenly things seemed to change. Mrs. Vandemeyer came down from London. She and the doctor asked me questions, experimented with various treatments. There was some talk of sending me to a specialist in Paris. In the end, they did not dare risk it. I overheard something that seemed to show that other people--friends--were looking for me. I learnt later that the nurse who had looked after me went to Paris, and consulted a specialist, representing herself to be me. He put her through some searching tests, and exposed her loss of memory to be fraudulent; but she had taken a note of his methods and reproduced them on me. I dare say I couldn't have deceived the specialist for a minute--a man who has made a lifelong study of a thing is unique--but I managed once again to hold my own with them. The fact that I'd not thought of myself as Jane Finn for so long made it easier.

"One night I was whisked off to London at a moment's notice. They took me back to the house in Soho. Once I got away from the sanatorium I felt different--as though something in me that had been buried for a long time was waking up again.

"They sent me in to wait on Mr. Beresford. (Of course I didn't know his name then.) I was suspicious--I thought it was another trap. But he looked so honest, I could hardly believe it. However, I was careful in all I said, for I knew we could be

overheard. There's a small hole, high up in the wall.

"But on the Sunday afternoon a message was brought to the house. They were all very disturbed. Without their knowing, I listened. Word had come that he was to be killed. I needn't tell the next part, because you know it. I thought I'd have time to rush up and get the papers from their hiding-place, but I was caught. So I screamed out that he was escaping, and I said I wanted to go back to Marguerite. I shouted the name three times very loud. I knew the others would think I meant Mrs. Vandemeyer, but I hoped it might make Mr. Beresford think of the picture. He'd unhooked one the first day--that's what made me hesitate to trust him."

She paused.

"Then the papers," said Sir James slowly, "are still at the back of the picture in that room."

"Yes." The girl had sunk back on the sofa exhausted with the strain of the long story.

Sir James rose to his feet. He looked at his watch.

"Come," he said, "we must go at once."

"To-night?" queried Tuppence, surprised.

"To-morrow may be too late," said Sir James gravely. "Besides, by going to-night we have the chance of capturing that great man and super-criminal--Mr. Brown!"

There was dead silence, and Sir James continued:

"You have been followed here--not a doubt of it. When we leave the house we shall be followed again, but not molested, FOR IT IS MR. BROWN'S PLAN THAT WE ARE TO LEAD HIM. But the Soho house is under police supervision night and day. There are several men watching it. When we enter that house, Mr. Brown will not draw back--he will risk all, on the chance of obtaining the spark to fire his mine. And he fancies the risk not great--since he will enter in the guise of a friend!"

Tuppence flushed, then opened her mouth impulsively.

"But there's something you don't know--that we haven't told you." Her eyes dwelt on Jane in perplexity.

"What is that?" asked the other sharply. "No hesitations, Miss Tuppence. We need to be sure of our going."

But Tuppence, for once, seemed tongue-tied.

"It's so difficult--you see, if I'm wrong--oh, it would be dreadful." She made a grimace at the unconscious Jane. "Never forgive me," she observed cryptically.

"You want me to help you out, eh?"

"Yes, please. YOU know who Mr. Brown is, don't you?"

"Yes," said Sir James gravely. "At last I do."

"At last?" queried Tuppence doubtfully. "Oh, but I thought----" She paused.

"You thought correctly, Miss Tuppence. I have been morally certain of his identity for some time--ever since the night of Mrs. Vandemeyer's mysterious death."

"Ah!" breathed Tuppence.

"For there we are up against the logic of facts. There are only two solutions. Either the chloral was administered by her own hand, which theory I reject utterly, or else----"

"Yes?"

"Or else it was administered in the brandy you gave her. Only three people touched that brandy--you, Miss Tuppence, I myself, and one other--Mr. Julius Hersheimer!"

Jane Finn stirred and sat up, regarding the speaker with wide astonished eyes.

"At first, the thing seemed utterly impossible. Mr. Hersheimer, as the son of a prominent millionaire, was a well-known figure in America. It seemed utterly impossible that he and Mr. Brown could be one and the same. But you cannot escape from the logic of facts. Since the thing was so--it must be accepted. Remember Mrs. Vandemeyer's sudden and inexplicable agitation. Another proof, if proof was needed.

"I took an early opportunity of giving you a hint. From some words of Mr.

Hersheimer's at Manchester, I gathered that you had understood and acted on that hint. Then I set to work to prove the impossible possible. Mr. Beresford rang me up and told me, what I had already suspected, that the photograph of Miss Jane Finn had never really been out of Mr. Hersheimer's possession----"

But the girl interrupted. Springing to her feet, she cried out angrily:

"What do you mean? What are you trying to suggest? That Mr. Brown is JULIUS? Julius--my own cousin!"

"No, Miss Finn," said Sir James unexpectedly. "Not your cousin. The man who calls himself Julius Hersheimer is no relation to you whatsoever."