

The Secret Adversary



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PROLOGUE

It was 2 p.m. on the afternoon of May 7, 1915. The *Lusitania* had been struck by two torpedoes in succession and was sinking rapidly, while the boats were being launched with all possible speed. The women and children were being lined up awaiting their turn. Some still clung desperately to husbands and fathers; others clutched their children closely to their breasts. One girl stood alone, slightly apart from the rest. She was quite young, not more than eighteen. She did not seem afraid, and her grave, steadfast eyes looked straight ahead.

"I beg your pardon."

A man's voice beside her made her start and turn. She had noticed the speaker more than once amongst the first-class passengers. There had been a hint of mystery about him which had appealed to her imagination. He spoke to no one. If anyone spoke to him he was quick to rebuff the overture. Also he had a nervous way of looking over his shoulder with a swift, suspicious glance.

She noticed now that he was greatly agitated. There were beads of perspiration on his brow. He was evidently in a state of overmastering fear. And yet he did not strike her as the kind of man who would be afraid to meet death!

"Yes?" Her grave eyes met his inquiringly.

He stood looking at her with a kind of desperate irresolution.

"It must be!" he muttered to himself. "Yes—it is the only way." Then aloud he said abruptly: "You are an American?"

"Yes."

"A patriotic one?"

The girl flushed.

"I guess you've no right to ask such a thing! Of course I am!"

"Don't be offended. You wouldn't be if you knew how much there was at stake. But I've got to trust some one—and it must be a woman."

"Why?"

"Because of 'women and children first.'" He looked round and lowered his voice. "I'm carrying papers—vitally important papers. They may make all the difference to the Allies in the war. You understand? These papers have got to be saved! They've more chance with you than with me. Will you take them?"

The girl held out her hand.

"Wait—I must warn you. There may be a risk—if I've been followed. I don't think I have, but one never knows. If so, there will be danger. Have you the nerve to go through with it?"

The girl smiled.

“I’ll go through with it all right. And I’m real proud to be chosen! What am I to do with them afterwards?”

“Watch the newspapers! I’ll advertise in the personal column of the *Times*, beginning ‘Shipmate.’ At the end of three days if there’s nothing—well, you’ll know I’m down and out. Then take the packet to the American Embassy, and deliver it into the Ambassador’s own hands. Is that clear?”

“Quite clear.”

“Then be ready—I’m going to say good-bye.” He took her hand in his. “Good-bye. Good luck to you,” he said in a louder tone.

Her hand closed on the oilskin packet that had lain in his palm.

The *Lusitania* settled with a more decided list to starboard. In answer to a quick command, the girl went forward to take her place in the boat.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUNG ADVENTURERS, LTD.

"Tommy, old thing!"

"Tuppence, old bean!"

The two young people greeted each other affectionately, and momentarily blocked the Dover Street Tube exit in doing so. The adjective "old" was misleading. Their united ages would certainly not have totalled forty-five.

"Not seen you for simply centuries," continued the young man. "Where are you off to? Come and chew a bun with me. We're getting a bit unpopular here—blocking the gangway as it were. Let's get out of it."

The girl assenting, they started walking down Dover Street towards Piccadilly.

"Now then," said Tommy, "where shall we go?"

The very faint anxiety which underlay his tone did not escape the astute ears of Miss Prudence Cowley, known to her intimate friends for some mysterious reason as "Tuppence." She pounced at once.

"Tommy, you're stony!"

"Not a bit of it," declared Tommy unconvincingly. "Rolling in cash."

"You always were a shocking liar," said Tuppence severely, "though you did once persuade Sister Greenbank that the doctor had ordered you beer as a tonic, but forgotten to write it on the chart. Do you remember?"

Tommy chuckled.

"I should think I did! Wasn't the old cat in a rage when she found out? Not that she was a bad sort really, old Mother Greenbank! Good old hospital—demobbed like everything else, I suppose?"

Tuppence sighed.

"Yes. You too?"

Tommy nodded.

"Two months ago."

"Gratuity?" hinted Tuppence.

"Spent."

"Oh, Tommy!"

"No, old thing, not in riotous dissipation. No such luck! The cost of living—ordinary plain, or garden living nowadays is, I assure you, if you do not know—"

"My dear child," interrupted Tuppence, "there is nothing I do *not* know about the cost of living. Here we are at Lyons', and we will each of us pay for our own. That's it!" And Tuppence led the way upstairs.

The place was full, and they wandered about looking for a table, catching odds and ends of conversation as they did so.

"And—do you know, she sat down and *cried* when I told her she couldn't have the flat after all." "It was simply a *bargain*, my dear! Just like the one Mabel Lewis brought from Paris——"

"Funny scraps one does overhear," murmured Tommy. "I passed two Johnnies in the street to-day talking about some one called Jane Finn. Did you ever hear such a name?"

But at that moment two elderly ladies rose and collected parcels, and Tuppence deftly ensconced herself in one of the vacant seats.

Tommy ordered tea and buns. Tuppence ordered tea and buttered toast.

"And mind the tea comes in separate teapots," she added severely.

Tommy sat down opposite her. His bared head revealed a shock of exquisitely slicked-back red hair. His face was pleasantly ugly—nondescript, yet unmistakably the face of a gentleman and a sportsman. His brown suit was well cut, but perilously near the end of its tether.

They were an essentially modern-looking couple as they sat there. Tuppence had no claim to beauty, but there was character and charm in the elfin lines of her little face, with its determined chin and large, wide-apart grey eyes that looked mistily out from under straight, black brows. She wore a small bright green toque over her black bobbed hair, and her extremely short and rather shabby skirt revealed a pair of uncommonly dainty ankles. Her appearance presented a valiant attempt at smartness.

The tea came at last, and Tuppence, rousing herself from a fit of meditation, poured it out.

"Now then," said Tommy, taking a large bite of bun, "let's get up-to-date. Remember, I haven't seen you since that time in hospital in 1916."

"Very well." Tuppence helped herself liberally to buttered toast. "Abridged biography of Miss Prudence Cowley, fifth daughter of Archdeacon Cowley of Little Missendell, Suffolk. Miss Cowley left the delights (and drudgeries) of her home life early in the war and came up to London, where she entered an officers' hospital. First month: Washed up six hundred and forty-eight plates every day. Second month: Promoted to drying aforesaid plates. Third month: Promoted to peeling potatoes. Fourth month: Promoted to cutting bread and butter. Fifth month: Promoted one floor up to duties of wardmaid with mop and pail. Sixth month: Promoted to waiting at table. Seventh month: Pleasing appearance and nice manners so striking that am promoted to waiting on the Sisters! Eighth month: Slight check in career. Sister Bond ate Sister Westhaven's egg! Grand row! Wardmaid clearly to blame! Inattention in such important matters cannot be too highly censured. Mop and pail again! How are the mighty fallen! Ninth month: Promoted to sweeping out wards, where I found a friend of my childhood in Lieutenant Thomas Beresford (bow, Tommy!), whom I had not seen for

five long years. The meeting was affecting! Tenth month: Reproved by matron for visiting the pictures in company with one of the patients, namely: the aforementioned Lieutenant Thomas Beresford. Eleventh and twelfth months: Parlourmaid duties resumed with entire success. At the end of the year left hospital in a blaze of glory. After that, the talented Miss Cowley drove successively a trade delivery van, a motor-lorry and a general! The last was the pleasantest. He was quite a young general!"

"What blighter was that?" inquired Tommy. "Perfectly sickening the way those brass hats drove from the War Office to the Savoy, and from the Savoy to the War Office!"

"I've forgotten his name now," confessed Tuppence. "To resume, that was in a way the apex of my career. I next entered a Government office. We had several very enjoyable tea parties. I had intended to become a land girl, a postwoman, and a bus conductress by way of rounding off my career—but the Armistice intervened! I clung to the office with the true limpet touch for many long months, but, alas, I was combed out at last. Since then I've been looking for a job. Now then—your turn."

"There's not so much promotion in mine," said Tommy regretfully, "and a great deal less variety. I went out to France again, as you know. Then they sent me to Mesopotamia, and I got wounded for the second time, and went into hospital out there. Then I got stuck in Egypt till the Armistice happened, kicked my heels there some time longer, and, as I told you, finally got demobbed. And, for ten long, weary months I've been job hunting! There aren't any jobs! And, if there were, they wouldn't give 'em to me. What good am I? What do I know about business? Nothing."

Tuppence nodded gloomily.

"What about the colonies?" she suggested.

Tommy shook his head.

"I shouldn't like the colonies—and I'm perfectly certain they wouldn't like me!"

"Rich relations?"

Again Tommy shook his head.

"Oh, Tommy, not even a great-aunt?"

"I've got an old uncle who's more or less rolling, but he's no good."

"Why not?"

"Wanted to adopt me once. I refused."

"I think I remember hearing about it," said Tuppence slowly. "You refused because of your mother——"

Tommy flushed.

"Yes, it would have been a bit rough on the mater. As you know, I was all she had. Old boy hated her—wanted to get me away from her. Just a bit of spite."

"Your mother's dead, isn't she?" said Tuppence gently.

Tommy nodded.

Tuppence's large grey eyes looked misty.

"You're a good sort, Tommy. I always knew it."

"Rot!" said Tommy hastily. "Well, that's my position. I'm just about desperate."

"So am I! I've hung out as long as I could. I've touted round. I've answered advertisements. I've tried every mortal blessed thing. I've screwed and saved and pinched! But it's no good. I shall have to go home!"

"Don't you want to?"

"Of course I don't want to! What's the good of being sentimental? Father's a dear—I'm awfully fond of him—but you've no idea how I worry him! He has that delightful early Victorian view that short skirts and smoking are immoral. You can imagine what a thorn in the flesh I am to him! He just heaved a sigh of relief when the war took me off. You see, there are seven of us at home. It's awful! All housework and mothers' meetings! I have always been the changeling. I don't want to go back, but—oh, Tommy, what else is there to do?"

Tommy shook his head sadly. There was a silence, and then Tuppence burst out:

"Money, money, money! I think about money morning, noon and night! I dare say it's mercenary of me, but there it is!"

"Same here," agreed Tommy with feeling.

"I've thought over every imaginable way of getting it too," continued Tuppence. "There are only three! To be left it, to marry it, or to make it. First is ruled out. I haven't got any rich elderly relatives. Any relatives I have are in homes for decayed gentlewomen! I always help old ladies over crossings, and pick up parcels for old gentlemen, in case they should turn out to be eccentric millionaires. But not one of them has ever asked me my name—and quite a lot never said 'Thank you.'"

There was a pause.

"Of course," resumed Tuppence, "marriage is my best chance. I made up my mind to marry money when I was quite young. Any thinking girl would! I'm not sentimental, you know." She paused. "Come now, you can't say I'm sentimental," she added sharply.

"Certainly not," agreed Tommy hastily. "No one would ever think of sentiment in connection with you."

"That's not very polite," replied Tuppence. "But I dare say you mean it all right. Well, there it is! I'm ready and willing—but I never meet any rich men! All the boys I know are about as hard up as I am."

"What about the general?" inquired Tommy.

"I fancy he keeps a bicycle shop in time of peace," explained Tuppence. "No, there it is! Now you could marry a rich girl."

"I'm like you. I don't know any."

"That doesn't matter. You can always get to know one. Now, if I see a man in a fur coat come out of the *Ritz* I can't rush up to him and say: 'Look here, you're rich. I'd like to know you.'"

"Do you suggest that I should do that to a similarly garbed female?"

"Don't be silly. You tread on her foot, or pick up her handkerchief, or something like that. If she thinks you want to know her she's flattered, and will manage it for you somehow."

"You overrate my manly charms," murmured Tommy.

"On the other hand," proceeded Tuppence, "my millionaire would probably run for his life! No—marriage is fraught with difficulties. Remains—to *make* money!"

"We've tried that, and failed," Tommy reminded her.

"We've tried all the orthodox ways, yes. But suppose we try the unorthodox. Tommy, let's be adventurers!"

"Certainly," replied Tommy cheerfully. "How do we begin?"

"That's the difficulty. If we could make ourselves known, people might hire us to commit crimes for them."

"Delightful," commented Tommy. "Especially coming from a clergyman's daughter!"

"The moral guilt," Tuppence pointed out, "would be theirs—not mine. You must admit that there's a difference between stealing a diamond necklace for yourself and being hired to steal it."

"There wouldn't be the least difference if you were caught!"

"Perhaps not. But I shouldn't be caught. I'm so clever."

"Modesty always was your besetting sin," remarked Tommy.

"Don't rag. Look here, Tommy, shall we really? Shall we form a business partnership?"

"Form a company for the stealing of diamond necklaces?"

"That was only an illustration. Let's have a—what do you call it in book-keeping?"

"Don't know. Never did any."

"I have—but I always got mixed up, and used to put credit entries on the debit side, and vice versa—so they fired me out. Oh, I know—a joint venture! It struck me as such a romantic phrase to come across in the middle of musty old figures. It's got an Elizabethan flavour about it—makes one think of galleons and doubloons. A joint venture!"

"Trading under the name of the Young Adventurers, Ltd.? Is that your idea, Tuppence?"

"It's all very well to laugh, but I feel there might be something in it."

"How do you propose to get in touch with your would-be employers?"

"Advertisement," replied Tuppence promptly. "Have you got a bit of paper and a pencil? Men usually seem to have. Just like we have hairpins and powder-puffs."

Tommy handed over a rather shabby green notebook, and Tuppence began writing busily.

"Shall we begin: 'Young officer, twice wounded in the war——'"

"Certainly not."

"Oh, very well, my dear boy. But I can assure you that that sort of thing might touch the heart of an elderly spinster, and she might adopt you, and then there would be no need for you to be a young adventurer at all."

"I don't want to be adopted."

"I forgot you had a prejudice against it. I was only ragging you! The papers are full up to the brim with that type of thing. Now listen—how's this? 'Two young adventurers for hire. Willing to do anything, go anywhere. Pay must be good.' (We might as well make that clear from the start.) Then we might add: 'No reasonable offer refused'—like flats and furniture."

"I should think any offer we get in answer to that would be a pretty unreasonable one!"

"Tommy! You're a genius! That's ever so much more chic. 'No unreasonable offer refused—if pay is good.' How's that?"

"I shouldn't mention pay again. It looks rather eager."

"It couldn't look as eager as I feel! But perhaps you are right. Now I'll read it straight through. 'Two young adventurers for hire. Willing to do anything, go anywhere. Pay must be good. No unreasonable offer refused.' How would that strike you if you read it?"

"It would strike me as either being a hoax, or else written by a lunatic."

"It's not half so insane as a thing I read this morning beginning 'Petunia' and signed 'Best Boy.'" She tore out the leaf and handed it to Tommy. "There you are. *Times*, I think. Reply to Box so-and-so. I expect it will be about five shillings. Here's half a crown for my share."

Tommy was holding the paper thoughtfully. His face burned a deeper red.

"Shall we really try it?" he said at last. "Shall we, Tuppence? Just for the fun of the thing?"

"Tommy, you're a sport! I knew you would be! Let's drink to success." She poured some cold dregs of tea into the two cups.

"Here's to our joint venture, and may it prosper!"

"The Young Adventurers, Ltd.!" responded Tommy.

They put down the cups and laughed rather uncertainly. Tuppence rose.

"I must return to my palatial suite at the hostel."

"Perhaps it is time I strolled round to the *Ritz*," agreed Tommy with a grin. "Where shall we meet? And when?"

"Twelve o'clock to-morrow. Piccadilly Tube station. Will that suit you?"

"My time is my own," replied Mr. Beresford magnificently.

"So long, then."

“Good-bye, old thing.”

The two young people went off in opposite directions. Tuppence's hostel was situated in what was charitably called Southern Belgravia. For reasons of economy she did not take a bus.

She was half-way across St. James's Park, when a man's voice behind her made her start.

“Excuse me,” it said. “But may I speak to you for a moment?”

CHAPTER II.

MR. WHITTINGTON'S OFFER

Tuppence turned sharply, but the words hovering on the tip of her tongue remained unspoken, for the man's appearance and manner did not bear out her first and most natural assumption. She hesitated. As if he read her thoughts, the man said quickly:

"I can assure you I mean no disrespect."

Tuppence believed him. Although she disliked and distrusted him instinctively, she was inclined to acquit him of the particular motive which she had at first attributed to him. She looked him up and down. He was a big man, clean shaven, with a heavy jowl. His eyes were small and cunning, and shifted their glance under her direct gaze.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

The man smiled.

"I happened to overhear part of your conversation with the young gentleman in Lyons'."

"Well—what of it?"

"Nothing—except that I think I may be of some use to you."

Another inference forced itself into Tuppence's mind:

"You followed me here?"

"I took that liberty."

"And in what way do you think you could be of use to me?"

The man took a card from his pocket and handed it to her with a bow.

Tuppence took it and scrutinized it carefully. It bore the inscription, "Mr. Edward Whittington." Below the name were the words "Esthonia Glassware Co.," and the address of a city office. Mr. Whittington spoke again:

"If you will call upon me to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, I will lay the details of my proposition before you."

"At eleven o'clock?" said Tuppence doubtfully.

"At eleven o'clock."

Tuppence made up her mind.

"Very well. I'll be there."

"Thank you. Good evening."

He raised his hat with a flourish, and walked away. Tuppence remained for some minutes gazing after him. Then she gave a curious movement of her shoulders, rather as a terrier shakes himself.

"The adventures have begun," she murmured to herself. "What does he want me to do, I wonder? There's something about you, Mr. Whittington, that I don't like at all. But, on the other hand, I'm not the

least bit afraid of you. And as I've said before, and shall doubtless say again, little Tuppence can look after herself, thank you!"

And with a short, sharp nod of her head she walked briskly onward. As a result of further meditations, however, she turned aside from the direct route and entered a post office. There she pondered for some moments, a telegraph form in her hand. The thought of a possible five shillings spent unnecessarily spurred her to action, and she decided to risk the waste of ninepence.

Disdaining the spiky pen and thick, black treacle which a beneficent Government had provided, Tuppence drew out Tommy's pencil which she had retained and wrote rapidly: "Don't put in advertisement. Will explain to-morrow." She addressed it to Tommy at his club, from which in one short month he would have to resign, unless a kindly fortune permitted him to renew his subscription.

"It may catch him," she murmured. "Anyway, it's worth trying."

After handing it over the counter she set out briskly for home, stopping at a baker's to buy three penny-worth of new buns.

Later, in her tiny cubicle at the top of the house she munched buns and reflected on the future. What was the Esthonia Glassware Co., and what earthly need could it have for her services? A pleasurable thrill of excitement made Tuppence tingle. At any rate, the country vicarage had retreated into the background again. The morrow held possibilities.

It was a long time before Tuppence went to sleep that night, and, when at length she did, she dreamed that Mr. Whittington had set her to washing up a pile of Esthonia Glassware, which bore an unaccountable resemblance to hospital plates!

It wanted some five minutes to eleven when Tuppence reached the block of buildings in which the offices of the Esthonia Glassware Co. were situated. To arrive before the time would look over-eager. So Tuppence decided to walk to the end of the street and back again. She did so. On the stroke of eleven she plunged into the recesses of the building. The Esthonia Glassware Co. was on the top floor. There was a lift, but Tuppence chose to walk up.

Slightly out of breath, she came to a halt outside the ground glass door with the legend painted across it "Esthonia Glassware Co."

Tuppence knocked. In response to a voice from within, she turned the handle and walked into a small rather dirty outer office.

A middle-aged clerk got down from a high stool at a desk near the window and came towards her inquiringly.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Whittington," said Tuppence.

"Will you come this way, please." He crossed to a partition door with "Private" on it, knocked, then opened the door and stood aside to let her pass in.

Mr. Whittington was seated behind a large desk covered with papers. Tuppence felt her previous judgment confirmed. There was something

wrong about Mr. Whittington. The combination of his sleek prosperity and his shifty eye was not attractive.

He looked up and nodded.

“So you’ve turned up all right? That’s good. Sit down, will you?”

Tuppence sat down on the chair facing him. She looked particularly small and demure this morning. She sat there meekly with downcast eyes whilst Mr. Whittington sorted and rustled amongst his papers. Finally he pushed them away, and leaned over the desk.

“Now, my dear young lady, let us come to business.” His large face broadened into a smile. “You want work? Well, I have work to offer you. What should you say now to £100 down, and all expenses paid?” Mr. Whittington leaned back in his chair, and thrust his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat.

Tuppence eyed him warily.

“And the nature of the work?” she demanded.

“Nominal—purely nominal. A pleasant trip, that is all.”

“Where to?”

Mr. Whittington smiled again.

“Paris.”

“Oh!” said Tuppence thoughtfully. To herself she said: “Of course, if father heard that he would have a fit! But somehow I don’t see Mr. Whittington in the role of the gay deceiver.”

“Yes,” continued Whittington. “What could be more delightful? To put the clock back a few years—a very few, I am sure—and re-enter one of those charming *pensionnats de jeunes filles* with which Paris abounds—”

Tuppence interrupted him.

“A *pensionnat*?”

“Exactly. Madame Colombier’s in the Avenue de Neuilly.”

Tuppence knew the name well. Nothing could have been more select. She had had several American friends there. She was more than ever puzzled.

“You want me to go to Madame Colombier’s? For how long?”

“That depends. Possibly three months.”

“And that is all? There are no other conditions?”

“None whatever. You would, of course, go in the character of my ward, and you would hold no communication with your friends. I should have to request absolute secrecy for the time being. By the way, you are English, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“Yet you speak with a slight American accent?”

“My great pal in hospital was a little American girl. I dare say I picked it up from her. I can soon get out of it again.”

“On the contrary, it might be simpler for you to pass as an American. Details about your past life in England might be more difficult to sustain. Yes, I think that would be decidedly better. Then—”

"One moment, Mr. Whittington! You seem to be taking my consent for granted."

Whittington looked surprised.

"Surely you are not thinking of refusing? I can assure you that Madame Colombier's is a most high-class and orthodox establishment. And the terms are most liberal."

"Exactly," said Tuppence. "That's just it. The terms are almost too liberal, Mr. Whittington. I cannot see any way in which I can be worth that amount of money to you."

"No?" said Whittington softly. "Well, I will tell you. I could doubtless obtain some one else for very much less. What I am willing to pay for is a young lady with sufficient intelligence and presence of mind to sustain her part well, and also one who will have sufficient discretion not to ask too many questions."

Tuppence smiled a little. She felt that Whittington had scored.

"There's another thing. So far there has been no mention of Mr. Beresford. Where does he come in?"

"Mr. Beresford?"

"My partner," said Tuppence with dignity. "You saw us together yesterday."

"Ah, yes. But I'm afraid we shan't require his services."

"Then it's off!" Tuppence rose. "It's both or neither. Sorry—but that's how it is. Good morning, Mr. Whittington."

"Wait a minute. Let us see if something can't be managed. Sit down again, Miss——" He paused interrogatively.

Tuppence's conscience gave her a passing twinge as she remembered the archdeacon. She seized hurriedly on the first name that came into her head.

"Jane Finn," she said hastily; and then paused open-mouthed at the effect of those two simple words.

All the geniality had faded out of Whittington's face. It was purple with rage, and the veins stood out on the forehead. And behind it all there lurked a sort of incredulous dismay. He leaned forward and hissed savagely:

"So that's your little game, is it?"

Tuppence, though utterly taken aback, nevertheless kept her head. She had not the faintest comprehension of his meaning, but she was naturally quick-witted, and felt it imperative to "keep her end up" as she phrased it.

Whittington went on:

"Been playing with me, have you, all the time, like a cat and mouse? Knew all the time what I wanted you for, but kept up the comedy. Is that it, eh?" He was cooling down. The red colour was ebbing out of his face. He eyed her keenly. "Who's been blabbing? Rita?"

Tuppence shook her head. She was doubtful as to how long she could sustain this illusion, but she realized the importance of not dragging an unknown Rita into it.

"No," she replied with perfect truth. "Rita knows nothing about me."

His eyes still bored into her like gimlets.

"How much do you know?" he shot out.

"Very little indeed," answered Tuppence, and was pleased to note that Whittington's uneasiness was augmented instead of allayed. To have boasted that she knew a lot might have raised doubts in his mind.

"Anyway," snarled Whittington, "you knew enough to come in here and plump out that name."

"It might be my own name," Tuppence pointed out.

"It's likely, isn't it, then there would be two girls with a name like that?"

"Or I might just have hit upon it by chance," continued Tuppence, intoxicated with the success of truthfulness.

Mr. Whittington brought his fist down upon the desk with a bang.

"Quit fooling! How much do you know? And how much do you want?"

The last five words took Tuppence's fancy mightily, especially after a meagre breakfast and a supper of buns the night before. Her present part was of the adventuress rather than the adventurous order, but she did not deny its possibilities. She sat up and smiled with the air of one who has the situation thoroughly well in hand.

"My dear Mr. Whittington," she said, "let us by all means lay our cards upon the table. And pray do not be so angry. You heard me say yesterday that I proposed to live by my wits. It seems to me that I have now proved I have some wits to live by! I admit I have knowledge of a certain name, but perhaps my knowledge ends there."

"Yes—and perhaps it doesn't," snarled Whittington.

"You insist on misjudging me," said Tuppence, and sighed gently.

"As I said once before," said Whittington angrily, "quit fooling, and come to the point. You can't play the innocent with me. You know a great deal more than you're willing to admit."

Tuppence paused a moment to admire her own ingenuity, and then said softly:

"I shouldn't like to contradict you, Mr. Whittington."

"So we come to the usual question—how much?"

Tuppence was in a dilemma. So far she had fooled Whittington with complete success, but to mention a palpably impossible sum might awaken his suspicions. An idea flashed across her brain.

"Suppose we say a little something down, and a fuller discussion of the matter later?"

Whittington gave her an ugly glance.

"Blackmail, eh?"

Tuppence smiled sweetly.

"Oh no! Shall we say payment of services in advance?"

Whittington grunted.

"You see," explained Tuppence still sweetly, "I'm so very fond of money!"

"You're about the limit, that's what you are," growled Whittington, with a sort of unwilling admiration. "You took me in all right. Thought you were quite a meek little kid with just enough brains for my purpose."

"Life," moralized Tuppence, "is full of surprises."

"All the same," continued Whittington, "some one's been talking. You say it isn't Rita. Was it—? Oh, come in."

The clerk followed his discreet knock into the room, and laid a paper at his master's elbow.

"Telephone message just come for you, sir."

Whittington snatched it up and read it. A frown gathered on his brow.

"That'll do, Brown. You can go."

The clerk withdrew, closing the door behind him. Whittington turned to Tuppence.

"Come to-morrow at the same time. I'm busy now. Here's fifty to go on with."

He rapidly sorted out some notes, and pushed them across the table to Tuppence, then stood up, obviously impatient for her to go.

The girl counted the notes in a businesslike manner, secured them in her handbag, and rose.

"Good morning, Mr. Whittington," she said politely. "At least, au revoir, I should say."

"Exactly. Au revoir!" Whittington looked almost genial again, a reversion that aroused in Tuppence a faint misgiving. "Au revoir, my clever and charming young lady."

Tuppence sped lightly down the stairs. A wild elation possessed her. A neighbouring clock showed the time to be five minutes to twelve.

"Let's give Tommy a surprise!" murmured Tuppence, and hailed a taxi.

The cab drew up outside the tube station. Tommy was just within the entrance. His eyes opened to their fullest extent as he hurried forward to assist Tuppence to alight. She smiled at him affectionately, and remarked in a slightly affected voice:

"Pay the thing, will you, old bean? I've got nothing smaller than a five-pound note!"

CHAPTER III.

A SET BACK

The moment was not quite so triumphant as it ought to have been. To begin with, the resources of Tommy's pockets were somewhat limited. In the end the fare was managed, the lady recollecting a plebeian twopence, and the driver, still holding the varied assortment of coins in his hand, was prevailed upon to move on, which he did after one last hoarse demand as to what the gentleman thought he was giving him?

"I think you've given him too much, Tommy," said Tuppence innocently. "I fancy he wants to give some of it back."

It was possibly this remark which induced the driver to move away.

"Well," said Mr. Beresford, at length able to relieve his feelings, "what the—dickens, did you want to take a taxi for?"

"I was afraid I might be late and keep you waiting," said Tuppence gently.

"Afraid—you—might—be—late! Oh, Lord, I give it up!" said Mr. Beresford.

"And really and truly," continued Tuppence, opening her eyes very wide, "I haven't got anything smaller than a five-pound note."

"You did that part of it very well, old bean, but all the same the fellow wasn't taken in—not for a moment!"

"No," said Tuppence thoughtfully, "he didn't believe it. That's the curious part about speaking the truth. No one does believe it. I found that out this morning. Now let's go to lunch. How about the *Savoy*?"

Tommy grinned.

"How about the *Ritz*?"

"On second thoughts, I prefer the *Piccadilly*. It's nearer. We shan't have to take another taxi. Come along."

"Is this a new brand of humour? Or is your brain really unhinged?" inquired Tommy.

"Your last supposition is the correct one. I have come into money, and the shock has been too much for me! For that particular form of mental trouble an eminent physician recommends unlimited *Hors d'œuvre*, Lobster à l'américaine, Chicken Newberg, and Pêche Melba! Let's go and get them!"

"Tuppence, old girl, what has really come over you?"

"Oh, unbelieving one!" Tuppence wrenched open her bag. "Look here, and here, and here!"

"Great Jehosaphat! My dear girl, don't wave Fishers aloft like that!"

"They're not Fishers. They're five times better than Fishers, and this one's ten times better!"