

you picked that up is wonderful. I don't know what we should have done without you. Now do take a rest this afternoon and don't think any more about it till after dinner. About half-past ten you had better announce your intention of retiring for the night, then come down again and meet us in the hall. Put on something warm and serviceable; you need not be afraid of meeting the servants, because they will all be sent to bed by that time."

"Vera was glad enough to have an hour or two to herself to wander about the grand old house and make herself agreeable to Lady Inchcliffe. It seemed strange to stroll up and down the magnificent terrace in front of the castle, to look out over the ancient park where the deer were lying peacefully under the trees, and realize the deadly intrigue which was going on only a mile or two away. It seemed to Vera that she was leading two separate lives. She sat in the drawing-room presently listening to Lady Inchcliffe's pleasant frivolous chatter and all the time longing for the moment of action to arrive. She could hear the men talking in the billiard-room, she could hear the click of the balls and someone calling the score. All this was such a long way from trouble and strife that Vera could not altogether grasp the connection between the two. Then the time came for her to bid her hostess good-night, and a quarter of an hour later with Hallett and the rest she was making her way across the park in the direction of the house on the cliff. They did not touch the road at any point, and just as a clock somewhere was striking the hour of eleven the discreet caretaker opened the door and admitted them.

"Nobody been here, I suppose?" Hallett asked. "That's all right. No, we are not coming in. We have work to do elsewhere. But we are leaving this lady behind and you will do anything she asks. Please show her into the suite of bedrooms and bath-rooms in the front of the house and point out where the controlling switch of the electric light is. I think that's all."

The discreet subordinate bowed respectfully and asked Vera if she would be good enough to follow him. She had nothing with her, not even the key to the cipher, for she already knew that by heart. She asked her guide a few simple questions, then when she had satisfied herself that the box of embroidered letters and needle and cotton were handy, she closed the door and proceeded to study the card on which Hallett had tabulated his messages and the various times they were to be signalled by means of the window curtains. It was a somewhat monotonous job, requiring a certain amount of patience and at intervals the putting out of the light whilst the necessary letters were being altered. But at length the messages drew to a close and the last one had just been signalled when there came a low tap at the door and the caretaker looked anxiously in.

"I don't quite know what to do, miss," he said. "Some visitors have just turned up asking to see Mr. Blair Allison. I had to say I was only here taking another man's place and that I'd inquire. If only Mr. Hallett was here."

A sudden fear flashed into Vera's mind.

"Did these people give any names?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, miss. I asked for names and the gentleman calls himself Alonzo and the other is Lady Loxton."

CHAPTER XLVII.

The Hour That Mattered.

VERA had quite forgotten both Lady Loxton and Alonzo. They had gone clean out of her mind from the moment that she had left London, and she never thought of saying anything to Hallett about them. Of course, Hallett had been informed that the two spies had been present at the attack on Brighton and that in point of fact they had engineered the whole thing, but she had never got far enough in her story to reach the point when Alonzo had proclaimed

the fact that he and his companion had been recognized and had suggested that they should fly to Blair Allison for protection.

And here they were at the door clamouring for admission. The reason for their coming was perfectly plain. They had been unfortunately recognized by someone and were fully alive to the fact that so far as they were concerned the game was up and England was no longer a place of safety. They had probably come with a view to getting away on one of the fishing smacks to the Dutch coast. Once there they were safe enough even though their story was known to every peasant in Holland.

That was one of the advantages of being a spy. Once beyond an enemy's frontier, and he could laugh at the country he had betrayed. And so it was with Alonzo and his companion. They had come up here knowing that Blair Allison would hide them until they could be smuggled across the sea. In a way without knowing it they had delivered themselves into the hands of the foe, and indeed in the circumstances they could have chosen no more unfortunate hiding-place. But even at this moment they were very near to discovering the truth, and this was what Vera had to prevent. She must allay the suspicions of these people, she must account for her own presence there, and keep the spies until help came.

She took in the caretaker at a glance. She liked the look of him, she liked his resolute face and determined jaw. And, moreover, Hallett had told her that she could confide in this subordinate if anything like danger presented itself.

"You have done quite well so far," she said. "Those people downstairs are unscrupulous. They have come here under a misapprehension. They come here to hide themselves until they can leave the country. They must not be allowed to leave, indeed Mr. Hallett would be terribly annoyed if they slipped through his fingers. Invite them into the house, tell them Mr. Blair Allison is away but that the lady of the house will be down presently. You had better suggest that she had gone to bed but that on hearing their names she had decided to come downstairs. That will give us a quarter of an hour's delay at least. If they get really suspicious, then you will have to show your hand and detain them. Do not hesitate to show violence, if necessary."

The man tapped his pocket significantly.

"YOU needn't be afraid, miss," he said. "Mr. Hallett and me, we have been in many a tight place together and we have always come out top. But what do you propose to do, miss?"

"I am going to see if I can find Mr. Hallett or some of them," Vera said. "I don't suppose they are very far off. I'll come back as soon as I can. You had better go and give my message to the visitors and ask them into the house. Put them in a room if you can where there is only one window, a room you could lock them in if you wanted to. Make escape as difficult as possible. And if you can steal out presently and damage the car they came in it would be perhaps just as well. Now go along."

The caretaker favoured Vera with an admiring glance and departed on his errand. Vera had fortunately finished sending her messages now, so that she was able to act as she pleased. She stole very cautiously down the stairs and into the hall. It would never do for her to meet Lady Loxton or Alonzo at that moment, and she was pleased to see that all the doors leading out of the hall were closed and that the caretaker was standing there apparently listening. As Vera came forward he smiled significantly and jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the morning-room. Vera could hear the murmur of voices as she smiled in reply and then made her way out on to the lawn. It was very dark there, and just for a moment she hardly knew which way to turn. She was trying to memorize the route by which she had come, and it seemed to her presently that she had got it clear. Then she

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