

A Co-operative Baby

By Tom Gallon

THERE was a child—and it has been found."

Mr. John Shearman spoke with a certain accent of triumph, although at the same time he watched his client somewhat nervously. That client stood, stiff and alert, and grave-faced, before the fire, looking down at the other man seated at a table turning over some papers. He made no comment on the news he had heard, save to nod sharply and to stand waiting.

"It has been a matter of considerable difficulty, Captain Follett," said Shearman, after a pause, during which the sharp rustle of the papers was the only sound in the room. "These people move about rapidly from place to place, and it is somewhat difficult to trace them."

"What people?"

"I have been for some time past in search of a particular troupe of dancers—girls—who would in all probability know something about the child," answered Shearman, speaking with grave deliberation. "Even when I found them at last I had to resort to subterfuge to find out anything about the child."

"The dead girl belonged to a troupe of dancers," said Captain Follett slowly. "I can well understand that your task, Mr. Shearman, has been a difficult one. But at last—he squared his shoulders and set lips firmly—"at last we are nearing the end. We have found the child—and the rest is easy."

The lawyer raised his eyebrows.

"Not quite so easy as you imagine, Captain Follett," he murmured. "We are merely at the beginning of our difficulties—not the end. I will explain as I go on. In the first place, I want to be absolutely certain we are on the right track. I have been fortunate enough to secure a photograph of the dead girl."

He fumbled amongst the papers, and drew out a cabinet photograph. Captain Neville Follett, watching him, slowly drew from his breast a letter-case, and took from it another photograph. As Shearman laid the photograph from the bundle of papers on the table the other stepped gravely forward and laid that other photograph beside it, much as though he were playing a hand in some strange game of cards.

"Do they match?" he asked quietly.

Shearman looked from one to the other; nodded quickly.

"Absolutely," he said. "May I ask where you got this? It has been injured, though fortunately the face is untouched. What is this hole?"

"Made by a bullet," answered the Captain. "If you turn it over you'll find a dark stain on the back; that's blood. It's something of a coincidence that the photograph is pierced in precisely the same spot—straight through the breast—as my brother was shot. He wore this"—Captain Follett touched the photograph with his finger-nail lightly—"in the pocket of his tunic; the bullet that killed him went straight through it."

The lawyer, looking a little awed, had hastily put the photograph down; he waited while the Captain went on speaking.

"As you know, we were both in the same regiment, and by the very irony of things it happened that the boy was brought in, mortally wounded, and laid almost at my feet. There wasn't much time to say anything; you haven't time for words at such a moment as that. But he managed to get that photograph out of his breast, and he mentioned the name of the girl—and he spoke the name of the child. He had meant to marry the mother, but had been ordered abroad—and then had been afraid to send for her, or to tell me the truth."

"An old story," murmured Shearman with a grave nod.

"An old story, as you say," answered Captain Follett. "Dying, he thought of the mother and of the child; he begged me to look after them. So I promised—and as soon as I could get to England I sent for you, and gave you such information as I possessed."

He didn't know, then, that the mother was dead.

"He didn't know," answered the other. "As she is dead, it is all the more necessary that the child, being friendless, should be looked after."

Mr. Shearman coughed again, and glanced furtively at the tall man at the other side of the table.

"That's just the difficulty. The child is not friendless."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," said the Captain, a little impatiently.

"The position is a very difficult one," began the lawyer. "I have traced the very troupe of dancers of which this dead girl—Ruby Temple—was a member; they are known as 'The Jolliffe Troupe,' and are six in number. They travel about from town to town with a manager, and appear at certain halls. They are good, hard-working girls—and the child is with them."

"I begin to see daylight a little," said Captain Follett. "These young ladies are temporarily looking after the child—eh?"

"Not quite that," answered the lawyer. "They have adopted the baby, and they flatly refuse to give her up to anyone."

The Captain frowned and smoothed his moustache.

"I'm afraid," he said icily, after a pause, "that you have not clearly understood your instructions, Mr. Shearman. Those instructions were that the child was to be found, and was to be taken by you out of the custody of whatever persons were looking after it, and that these persons were to be suitably rewarded for their care of her. I told you that I was a rich man, and that money was no object. I wish you had understood that more clearly."

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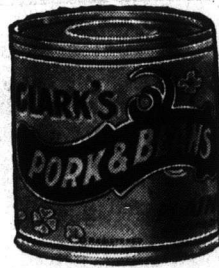


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