THE LATE TENANT

By GORDON HOLMES

CHAPTER XXI.

The Midnight Gathering

WHEN the train from Rigsworth brought Violet into Euston Station, she hurried through the barrier and asked an official to direct her to the nearest post-office. At this instant a slight accident happened which had a singular bearing on the events of the day. Neil, the valet, who had driven to Euston just in time to meet the incoming train, had seen her, and was proceeding in close pursuit when he tripped over a luggage barrow and fell headlong.

He was not much injured, but shaken more than a little, and when he was able to take up the chase again, Violet had vanished. Hence she was freed from espionage, and van Hupfeldt could only curse his useless emissary. The man Niel certainly did rush about like a whirlwind as soon as he recovered his breath; but Violet was in the post-office writing to David, and securely hidden from his ferret eyes.

Oddly enough, the first person she wished to see was Miss Ermyn L'Estrange. She remembered the actress well, as she had visited her once (Jenny, the maid, was out on an errand at the time) and it was one of the many curious discrepancies in the tissue of mingled fact and fiction which obscured her sister's fate that such a volatile and talkative woman should have written the curt little note at van Hupfeldt's bidding. Violet could not understand the reason, but she saw a loophole here. The long journey in the train had enabled her to review the information she possessed with a certain clarity and precision hitherto absent from her much bewildered thoughts. In a word, there were several marked lines of inquiry, and she was resolved to follow each separately.

She felt that she had gone the wrong way to work in the first excess of her grief. She was calm now, more skilled in hiding her emotions, less prone to jump at conclusions. All unknown to her, the little germ of passion planted in her heart by David's few words in the summer house was governing her whole being. From the timid, irresolute girl, who clung to unattainable ideals, she was transformed into a woman, ready to dare anything for the sake of the man she loved, while the mere notion of marriage with van Hupfeldt was so loathsome that she was spurred into the physical revolt and strenuous action to counteract it.

So it was in a restrained yet business like mood that she climbed the stairs leading to Miss L'Estrange's flat and rang the bell. The door was opened by Jenny.

Not all the resources of pert cockneyism availed that hapless domestic when she set eyes on Miss Mordaunt. She uttered a helpless little wail of dismay, and retreated a few steps, as though she half expected the wonder-stricken young woman to use strong measures with her.

"Well, what is it now?" came her mistress's sharp demand, for in that small abode there reigned what the Italians call "a delightful confidence," Jenny's scream and rush being audible in the drawing room.

"Oh!" stammered Jenny, "it's a young lydy, miss."

"A young lady? Is she nameless?"

"Oo," said Violet, advancing toward the voice; "your maid seems to be alarmed by the sight of me. You know me, Miss L'Estrange. I only wish I had discovered sooner that you employe my sister's servant, Sarah Gissing."

Ermyn was accustomed to stage situations. She instantly grasped her part; for she was fresh from the interview with David, and there could be no doubt that the unmasking of van Hupfeldt was as settled now as the third act of the farcical comedy in which she would play the soubrette that night.

"Sarah Gissing!" she said with a fine scorn. "That is not her name. She is Jenny—Jenny—blest if I have ever called her anything else. Here, you! what is your other name?"

"Blackey, miss," sobbed Jenny, in tears.

"But you said only yesterday that you were Sarah Gissing?" cried Violet.

"Y-yus, miss, an' it wasn't true."

"So you have never seen my sister?"

"No, miss."

"Why then did you lie to me so shamelessly?"

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"Please, miss, don't be 'ard; I was pide for it."

"Paid! By Mr. van Hupfeldt?"

"There is some mistake," broke in Miss L'Estrange, who was a trifle awed by Violet's quiet dignity. "It was a Mr. Strauss who came here and asked permission for Jenny to have the day free yesterday, in order to give some evidence he required."

"Are you quite sure it was Mr. Strauss?" asked Violet, turning away from Jenny as though the sight of her was offensive.

"Positive! I rented, or rather I took your sister's flat from him, and he has been plaguing my life out ever since about some papers he imagined I found there."

"But you wrote to me a little while ago," pleaded Violet.

"Strauss is a plausible person," countered the other woman readily. "He came here and spun such a yarn that I practically wrote at his dictation."

"There is no mistake this time, I hope."

Miss L'Estrange's color rose, and her red hair troubled her somewhat; but she answered with an effort: "There has never been any mistake on my part. Had you come to me in the first instance, and taken me into your confidence, I would have helped you. But you stormed at me quite unjustly, Miss Mordaunt, and it is not in human nature to take that sort of thing lying down, you know."

Then, seeing the sorrow in Violet's eyes, she went on with a real sympathy: "I wish we had been more candid with each other at first. And I had nothing whatever to do with Jenny's make-believe of yesterday. The girl is a first-rate cook, but she can tell lies faster than a dog can trot."

This poetic simile popped out unawares; but Violet heard the kindly tone rather than the words.

"I may want you again," she said simply. "May I rely on you if the need arises?"

"Indeed you may!" was the impulsive reply. "I have wept over your sister's unhappy fate, Miss Mordaunt, and I always thought Strauss was a villain. I hope that nice young fellow, David Harcourt, who has been on his track for months, will catch him one of these days, and give him a hiding, at the very least."

"Oh, you know Mr. Harcourt?"

And then Ermyn L'Estrange did a thing which ennobled her in her own eyes for many a day. "Yes," she said. "He found out that I occupied your sister's flat after her death; so he came to see me, and, if I may venture to say so, he betrayed an interest in you, Miss Mordaunt, which, had such a man shown it towards me, would have been deemed a very pleasing and charming testimony of his regard."

It was only a line out of an old play; but it served, and they kissed each other when they said good-by.

Although Violet was startled at alighting on such ready confirmation of van Hupfeldt's duplicity, there was a remarkable brightness in her eye, a spring-time elasticity in her step, when she emerged into the High-st. of Chelsea which had not been visible a little while earlier. In truth, she felt as a thrush may be supposed to feel after having successfully dodged the attack of a hawk. Were it not that she was treading the crowded streets of London she would have sung for sheer joy.

And now, feeling hungry, after her long journey, she entered a restaurant and ate a good meal, which was a sensible thing to do in itself, but which, in its way, was another tiny factor in the undoing of van Hupfeldt, as, thereby, she missed meeting David at Dibbin's office.

When she did ultimately reach that unconscious rendezvous, she found there the clerk who had given David such interesting information. This man knew Miss Mordaunt, and had some recollection of the dead Gwendoline; so he was civil, and assured Violet that his master would return from Scotland that evening.

"Mr. Dibbin has been at Dundee for some days," asked Violet.

"Let me see, miss; he went away on the fourth, and this is the ninth; practically six days, counting the journeys."

"Then he certainly could not have written to me on the seventh from London?"

The clerk was puzzled. "If you mean that he wasn't in London, then—" he began.

Violet did not show the man the letter which she had in her pocket. Perhaps it was best that Dibbin himself should read it first. But she did say: "He could not have had an interview with a Mr. van Hupfeldt, for instance?"

"Now, that is very odd, miss," said the clerk. "That is the very name of the gentleman who wired instructions to-day for Mr. Dibbin to go at once to Portsmouth. And, by Jove! begging your pardon, but the telegram came from your place, Rigsworth, in Warwickshire. I never thought of that before."

"It doesn't matter," said Violet; "I shall endeavor to meet Mr. Dibbin at King's Cross. And will you please not mention that I have called here?"

The knowledge that van Hupfeldt was striving