

## THE TACIT TRUCE - 006

Mrs. Kerry glanced at the tiny gold watch on her wrist and started to wind it with crisp nonchalance. When she was certain that the girl she had just engaged couldn't hear she permitted herself a little sigh of relief and, going to the window of the dining-room, watched the girl down the yard on her way to the gate until she turned out in the road and the house hid her. Yes, she'd do, Mrs. Kerry felt, smiling a little as she remembered the slight swagger that had been on the girl's hips, she'd do. Maybe a trifle pert, but she'd knock that out of her in a day or two. Mrs. Kerry hadn't liked the first two women she had talked to about the servant job that evening, although she had taken their addresses and told them they would hear from her. No, she hadn't very much liked them. They looked blousy and used, but this one... Mrs. Kerry liked her bold open face and long clean limbs.

Mrs. Kerry complimented herself on the ease with which she had got a new servant in these days when servants were so hard to get. Just a few words to the obliging, intelligent advertising man at the newspaper office the evening before, and this evening when she had reached home there were three women sauntering up and down before her house waiting to see her. They had all stopped in their pacing and watched Mrs. Kerry as she approached, watched with an uncertain, intimidated air, until one, she seemed the oldest of the three, a stout, slatternly-looking woman with spots about her face and neck, ambled forward as Mrs. Kerry paused invitingly, just for a moment, before

mounting the first step to her house. Immediately the other two hurried forward and the three besieged Mrs. Kerry, all talking at the same time, each trying to get in her application before the others. After a moment Mrs. Kerry had waved them around and down the yard to the back, and climbing the steps, pressed the button on her front door. Joan, the servant who was leaving at the end of the current month, came through the house, unlocked the front door from inside, and let Mrs. Kerry in.

Mrs. Kerry said:

“How’re you Joan? Look, there’re some women coming around by the back. Put them to sit in the dining-room till I’m down.”

Joan said, in petulant aggrieved tones:

“They’s been coming and going and coming and going and beating down the house the whole evening mam, keeping me back in my work. People what ain’t got nothing to do—”

“You should’ve put them to sit and wait until I came, Joan,” cut in Mrs. Kerry, crossing the hall and going upstairs. “That’d have been the best thing.”

Joan was a big strapping girl who looked bigger than ever now, and who had been with Mrs. Kerry for some two years. Three days before, with feet a-straddle and hands folded on her breast, Joan had informed Mrs. Kerry that she would have to go at the end of the month. Mrs. Kerry had looked her up and down, and had decided that she would have to go. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Kerry had been wondering for some time when she would.

“Leastways,” the girl had offered. “maybe I could send someone to keep time for me till I’m all right like, mam, if you’re willing,”

Mrs. Kerry was no prude, but she had a deep-rooted, inherent prejudice against girls who, as she phrased it, did the wrong thing first. So she just looked at Joan, up and down, like that, looked off, and said nothing. But the next evening, when Mrs. Kerry left work, she had stopped in at the newspaper office where she dictated a few words to the obliging, intelligent young man who must be just under the Advertising Manager. Mrs. Kerry had asked for the Advertising Manager, but the obliging, intelligent young man had politely informed her that the Advertising Manager had gone. . . he left at four...four sharp...but if there was any thing he could do for a lady, mam. . . .

Mrs. Kerry was a small, efficient-looking woman at fifty-three, well preserved and capable, with hard, pale-blue eyes that regarded you with an almost contemptuous coolness from behind thin shell-rimmed glasses. She was a Postmistress, a post which had been given her as a kind of consolation when her husband, a captain in the police force, had returned to England for service in the first Great War and had been killed in France.

Only one person besides Mrs. Kerry lived in her house in Cheapside. That was Mr. Stokes, Mrs. Kerry’s father. Mrs. Kerry had a son, but he was in England reading law.

Mr. Stokes was a little choleric old wreck of a sahib. He had been an overseer for a big rubber interest in India up to his retirement, and it

was his grouse that the Indian sun had withered and rotted his insides. He hardly ever went out now, but prowled about the house, baiting and bullying the one servant Mrs. Kerry left about the place, rankling at his age, resentful of his impotent decrepitude. He had the strength of a child and the spleen of a cornered stoat. A great dealer of his choler was spent in his room in writing and tearing furiously into shreds the first chapter of what he called: *Trebling the rubber output of India in three years.*

Mr. Stokes stood at a window, his room upstairs, awaiting his breakfast. The servant brought his breakfast up to his room on a tray at half past eight, his midday meal at one, and snacks at two hour intervals. Dinner he took with his daughter in the dining-room downstairs at six. Mr. Stokes couldn't eat much at one sitting because of his stomach. Mrs. Kerry had his diet typewritten and stuck with four brass head pins on the wall of the kitchen downstairs so that the servant could see it.

Mr. Stokes stood at the window, his slippered foot raised on the seat of a chair, his bulging, veinous eyes, puckered at the corners like old parchment, glaring begrudgingly down in the neighbouring yard at two boys encouraging a parrot to talk. A few inches of his bony ankles showed under his cream dressing gown, which was too big and overlapped his shrunken frame grotesquely. The skin was stretched taut upon his anaemic, closeshorn face which was white and shiny as

bone, and with his completely bald scalp his longish head bore a striking resemblance to an egg. Mr. Stokes felt that frost on his face was a concession to age, so he shaved twice a day.

Mr. Stokes' room was a large plain one, the one Mr. and Mrs. Kerry had used before Mr. Kerry's death, white-ceilinged, with clean, cream walls hung with cheap prints. To one side of the long room, across its breadth, was Mr. Stokes' bed, as yet still slept-in and unmade. In easy reach from the head of the bed was a card table, the top covered with green baize and littered with ink, odd parts of fountain pens, shaving cream, reams of foolscap paper, tobacco tins, used razor blades, stacks of newspapers some dusty with wrappers still unbroken, two or three books, letters and a pipe whose black stem peeped out from under the litter of confusion. Beside the card table was a waste-paper basket, half full of crumpled and hurriedly torn-across sheets. Across the length of the room, to the side away from the bed, was a large travelling trunk that did service as a wardrobe. These, and the chair upon which Mr. Stokes had his foot were the only furnishings of the room, and with the yellow lion's skin spread down in the centre of the floor the room struck you with a macabre, hostile emptiness.

Like the majority of little men, Mr. Stokes through all his life had always been at pains to stress his masculinity, and whenever possible, he had affected big, desert rooms stripped of all else but the barest essentials.

At the Sound of the knock Mr. Stokes turned his head from the window and fixed his eyes on the door. The girl could see Mr. Stokes at the window through the half open door, and so she pushed the door gently further in with her foot and came into the room, holding the loaded tray down in her arms.

“It’s your breakfast what I’ve brought, sir,” she said. “Mistress told me the man with the greens would be here at eight, but he ain’t come yet sir.”

Mr. Stokes stared long at her with an unpleasant, disconcerting intentness. He felt his spleen rise as the girl maintained his glare. After a time he swallowed, put his back to the window and said;

“You’re new, aren’t you?”

“Yes sir.”

“What’s your name?”

“Ethel, Ethel Bourne, sir. Which place can I put the tray? I’ve left milk on the gas, sir.”

Mr. Stokes added the fact that the girl’s christian name was the same as his daughter’s to his hoard of affronts.

“Where do you live?” he went on, nursing his choler, thinking of the moment when he would bawl her out.

“Lakes’ Folly.”

“M-m-mm. Ever been in service before?”

“Yes sir. I’ve been at the Aquatic and the Colonial Secretary and Lady Shallcross and Government House. If it’s references you’ll be wanting

sir I've shown the Mistress plenty. Please sir which place can I put the tray sir? I've left milk on the gas sir."

Mr. Stokes looked her up and down, then let his venom flare for one brief moment:

"You'll answer my questions and not a thing else see? By God." Then he took himself in hand and continued his baiting, his hand in his dressing-gown caressing his stomach. "Why did you leave your last place?"

"Well sir, well, my last mistress was what some would maybe call unreasonable like."

"How so?"

"Well sir, well, she had heat. Heat in the blood. Do this and do that, and if you didn't do it the minute she'd fly at you. But the milk sir. It'll be in the gas by now sir. Which place can I put the tray?"

Mr. Stokes looked at her like a snake. Looked at her black, oiled hair neat under her ridiculous little cap, the hint of insolence in her good-looking face, the brave, powerful upthrust of her young bust, the small waist above the flair of her large hips, the resilient, graceful strength of her long thighs. Mr. Stokes looked, felt all his weakness and decrepitude before her vital youth, and gave full rein to his rage.

"Put it on the floor," he barked, his voice rising at every word as he further stimulated his spleen, "put it on the floor. Christ, you walk in here with all your queenly airs and your deuced insolence and your

backchat, without even a “good-morning”, on this the first morning of your job and expect to keep it. You’re all alike. A deuced insolent bunch of beggars as ready as adders to strike the hands that feed you. You’ve been in service before, have you. But by God, I’ll teach you a thing or two in manners. Out you go, and when you’ve taught your deuced tongue to say “good-morning” you may come again. Out you go,” he roared, “or by God, I’ll get you out on the street where you belong.”

“And it’s my mother’s house with a whole roof I’d be going to,” said the girl, standing her ground stubbornly.

Mr. Stokes blanched even whiter still. Mr. Stokes flamed red. Seized in a fit of mad cholera he crossed the room in a number of strides, and snatching the teapot from the tray which the girl still held down in her arms before her, swept it round in a vicious sweep, sending a stream of hot liquid spouting over the girl’s bare arms. Involuntarily she dropped the tray, and as it crashed to the floor, she lurched away to the right to avoid the second scalding stream from the backward sweep of the teapot. As the rage-mad Mr. Stokes swung back the teapot for the third time the gush of hot cocoa failed, and he hurled the now ineffective weapon at the cowering, retreating girl. It took her on the hip, and glancing off, smashed into fragments against the wall. Crouching, the girl grovelled among the bits of broken teapot, and taking a piece, threw it with half-hearted strength, striking Mr. Stokes in the stomach. Not a nasty blow, but enough to cause Mr. Stokes to foam with fury at



the mouth. Straddling the debris where the tray had fallen he commandeered the door, bombarding the girl with bits of broken ware and food, sandwiches, eggs, marmalade, grapefruit, as they came to his groping hand. A piece of ware sliced across the girl's cheek, and as she felt the urgency of the warm blood trickling down her face she crossed the room at a run in the direction of Mr. Stokes' chair. Snatching the chair by the arms and using the seat as a shield to her face she prepared to charge her way past Mr. Stokes to the door. But Mr. Stokes, panting with fury and exertion, mad at the mere thought of retaliation, foraged among the mess on the floor and, retrieving the fork and knife, stood armed, one in each hand, awaiting her assault. The girl, peering through the cane of the chair, halted undecided before the menace of these weapons. But Mr. Stokes, his anger to a white pitch, was determined to afford her no respite. Brandishing his weapons he advanced, and circling her, tried to outflank her and get past the chair's feet. This was just what the girl had hoped for. Warding him off with the chair until he had circled her to a point out of line with the door, she chucked the chair at him and made a straight run from the room. Mr. Stokes chased her to the landing, then stood glaring down the well of the stairs at her fleeing back. When his anger cooled he turned back into his room, and throwing the knife and fork in the mess on the floor, went over and let himself down on to his bed. For a long time he listened to the hammering in his head and the pump and suck of his own blood.

Some minutes later the girl came and poked her head cautiously round the door. When she saw him on his bed her eyes slid to the centre of the room. When she saw the knife and fork in the mess there she turned, and lifting the pail of water which she had rested outside the room, brought it inside the room. Leaving it there, she journeyed downstairs again to return with soap, a scrubbing brush and a swab, and without a glance at Mr. Stokes started to clean the floor and the spattered walls.

Mr. Stokes reached out, and rummaging in the litter on the card table, found his pipe and a box of matches. He shook the tobacco tins one by one to find the one that was not empty, and when he had found it he loaded his pipe, lit it, turned over on his side, and watched the girl at work as he smoked.

When the girl had put the room to rights she dropped brush and swab in the water in the pail, and lifting the pail carried it downstairs. In a few minutes she returned with a tray loaded the same way as the first, except that this time there was a small bunch of lettuce and a yellowish thing in a saucer that looked like grated carrots in milk. Shifting the tray to the crook of one arm, she went and lifted the chair which lay capsized as when she had thrown it at Mr. Stokes, and carrying it over beside the bed, rested the loaded tray on it within easy reach of Mr. Stokes.

In the evening when his daughter got home and went upstairs to kiss him good evening, Mr. Stokes had cleared a space on the card table and

was writing. He submitted to her cold, perfunctory kiss, then said:

“That girl—the new one that started this morning.”

“What of her? What’s the matter?” asked Mrs. Kerry.

“Oh, nothing, How much do you pay her?”

“I’ve arranged to pay her ten dollars, the same the one that’s just left used to get. She hasn’t been complaining to you by any chance? She’ll get ten dollars and not a cent more.”

“All right, all right,” soothed Mr. Stokes. “Give her twelve all the same.”

“Twelve! What In the name of goodness. . . . Look, Papa, we aren’t rich, and there’re Jimmie’s fees to be seen after. You’re mad. Mrs. Dalglish, Mrs. Dalglish who’s rolling in money, she has two servants for that big house, and you know how much she gives them? You know how much she gives them? See if you can guess Papa. Eight shillings a week! And this girl. She hasn’t got a thing to do but prepare your meals. Not a scrid of washing, and ten dollars a month and board. Why, before I’d—”

“Christ,” barked In Mr. Stokes acidly, “Ethel, pay the girl the two dollars out of my money, not out of yours. Do you hear?”

“Oh. all right, all right,” Mrs. Kerry gave way puzzledly, shrugging her shoulders and going from the room.