

CHAPTER 1

It was Miss Somers's turn to make the tea. Miss Somers was the newest and the most inefficient of the typists. She was no longer young and had a mild worried face like a sheep. The kettle was not quite boiling when Miss Somers poured the water on to the tea, but poor Miss Somers was never quite sure when a kettle *was* boiling. It was one of the many worries that afflicted her in life.

She poured out the tea and took the cups round with a couple of limp, sweet biscuits in each saucer.

Miss Griffith, the efficient head typist, a grey-haired martinet who had been with Consolidated Investments Trust for sixteen years, said sharply: 'Water not boiling *again*, Somers!' and Miss Somers's worried meek face went pink and she said, 'Oh dear, I *did* think it was boiling *this* time.'

Miss Griffith thought to herself: 'She'll last for another month, perhaps, just while we're so busy . . . But really! The mess the silly idiot made of that letter to Eastern Developments—a perfectly straightforward job, and always so stupid over the tea. If it weren't so difficult to get hold

of any intelligent typists—and the biscuit tin lid wasn't shut tightly last time, either. *Really—?*

Like so many of Miss Griffith's indignant inner communings the sentence went unfinished.

At that moment Miss Grosvenor sailed in to make Mr Fortescue's sacred tea. Mr Fortescue had different tea, and different china and special biscuits. Only the kettle and the water from the cloakroom tap were the same. But on this occasion, being Mr Fortescue's tea, the water boiled. Miss Grosvenor saw to that.

Miss Grosvenor was an incredibly glamorous blonde. She wore an expensively cut little black suit and her shapely legs were encased in the very best and most expensive black-market nylons.

She sailed back through the typists' room without deigning to give anyone a word or a glance. The typists might have been so many blackbeetles. Miss Grosvenor was Mr Fortescue's own special personal secretary; unkind rumour always hinted that she was something more, but actually this was not true. Mr Fortescue had recently married a second wife, both glamorous and expensive, and fully capable of absorbing all his attention. Miss Grosvenor was to Mr Fortescue just a necessary part of the office décor—which was all very luxurious and very expensive.

Miss Grosvenor sailed back with the tray held out in front of her like a ritual offering. Through the inner office and through the waiting-room, where the more important clients were allowed to sit, and through her own ante-room, and finally with a light tap on the door she entered the holy of holies, Mr Fortescue's office.

A Pocket Full of Rye

It was a large room with a gleaming expanse of parquet floor on which were dotted expensive oriental rugs. It was delicately panelled in pale wood and there were some enormous stuffed chairs upholstered in pale buff leather. Behind a colossal sycamore desk, the centre and focus of the room, sat Mr Fortescue himself.

Mr Fortescue was less impressive than he should have been to match the room, but he did his best. He was a large flabby man with a gleaming bald head. It was his affectation to wear loosely cut country tweeds in his city office. He was frowning down at some papers on his desk when Miss Grosvenor glided up to him in her swanlike manner. Placing the tray on the desk at his elbow, she murmured in a low impersonal voice, 'Your tea, Mr Fortescue,' and withdrew.

Mr Fortescue's contribution to the ritual was a grunt.

Seated at her own desk again Miss Grosvenor proceeded with the business in hand. She made two telephone calls, corrected some letters that were lying there typed ready for Mr Fortescue to sign and took one incoming call.

'Ay'm afraid it's impossible just now,' she said in haughty accents. 'Mr Fortescue is in conference.'

As she laid down the receiver she glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes past eleven.

It was just then that an unusual sound penetrated through the almost sound-proof door of Mr Fortescue's office. Muffled, it was yet fully recognizable, a strangled agonized cry. At the same moment the buzzer on Miss Grosvenor's desk sounded in a long-drawn frenzied summons. Miss Grosvenor, startled for a moment into complete immobility,

rose uncertainly to her feet. Confronted by the unexpected, her poise was shaken. However, she moved towards Mr Fortescue's door in her usual statuesque fashion, tapped and entered.

What she saw upset her poise still further. Her employer behind his desk seemed contorted with agony. His convulsive movements were alarming to watch.

Miss Grosvenor said, 'Oh dear, Mr Fortescue, are you ill?' and was immediately conscious of the idiocy of the question. There was no doubt but that Mr Fortescue was very seriously ill. Even as she came up to him, his body was convulsed in a painful spasmodic movement.

Words came out in jerky gasps.

'Tea—what the hell—you put in the tea—get help—quick get a doctor—'

Miss Grosvenor fled from the room. She was no longer the supercilious blonde secretary—she was a thoroughly frightened woman who had lost her head.

She came running into the typists' office crying out:

'Mr Fortescue's having a fit—he's dying—we must get a doctor—he looks awful—I'm sure he's dying.'

Reactions were immediate and varied a good deal.

Miss Bell, the youngest typist, said, 'If it's epilepsy we ought to put a cork in his mouth. Who's got a cork?'

Nobody had a cork.

Miss Somers said, 'At his age it's probably apoplexy.'

Miss Griffith said, 'We must get a doctor—at *once*.'

But she was hampered in her usual efficiency because in all her sixteen years of service it had never been necessary to call a doctor to the city office. There was her own doctor

but that was at Streatham Hill. Where was there a doctor near here?

Nobody knew. Miss Bell seized a telephone directory and began looking up Doctors under D. But it was not a classified directory and doctors were not automatically listed like taxi ranks. Someone suggested a hospital—but which hospital? ‘It has to be the right hospital,’ Miss Somers insisted, ‘or else they won’t come. Because of the National Health, I mean. It’s got to be in the area.’

Someone suggested 999 but Miss Griffith was shocked at that and said it would mean the police and that would never do. For citizens of a country which enjoyed the benefits of Medical Service for all, a group of quite reasonably intelligent women showed incredible ignorance of correct procedure. Miss Bell started looking up Ambulances under A. Miss Griffith said, ‘There’s his own doctor—he must *have* a doctor.’ Someone rushed for the private address book. Miss Griffith instructed the office boy to go out and find a doctor—somehow, *anywhere*. In the private address book, Miss Griffith found Sir Edwin Sandeman with an address in Harley Street. Miss Grosvenor, collapsed in a chair, wailed in a voice whose accent was noticeably less Mayfair than usual, ‘I made the tea just as usual—really I did—there couldn’t have been anything wrong in it.’

‘*Wrong* in it?’ Miss Griffith paused, her hand on the dial of the telephone. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘*He* said it—Mr Fortescue—he said it was the tea—’

Miss Griffith’s hand hovered irresolutely between Welbeck and 999. Miss Bell, young and hopeful, said: ‘We

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ought to give him some mustard and water—*now*. Isn't there any mustard in the office?'

There was no mustard in the office.

Some short while later Dr Isaacs of Bethnal Green, and Sir Edwin Sandeman met in the elevator just as two different ambulances drew up in front of the building. The telephone and the office boy had done their work.

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