

CHAPTER EIGHT

JIMMIE LANE STOOD in his aunt's gateway. He saw Highway standing stock still in the broiling sun and wondered what the man was doing. There were other thoughts in Jimmie's head, too, thoughts which made him a little ashamed but which he couldn't help having. He wished a man didn't have to think such things, but, somehow, he felt they couldn't be stopped. He was wishing, in a mild way, his aunt hadn't chosen this particular time to die. If only she had waited a couple of weeks so he could have done some of the things he planned while he was in the city. He wanted to see the local fights for one thing. That meant meeting the boys, finding out who was coming and who was slipping. Maybe, too, he might have got himself a fight in one of the preliminaries. He was ripe for it. One of these days he was going to get into the semi-finals and then pull down a main-event for himself. They couldn't go on ignoring him for ever. He was strong and growing smarter all the time. He hadn't lost a fight in his last thirty-five starts.

His thoughts came around to his aunt. There'd be things to do, he supposed. He began to wonder what would happen afterwards. It wasn't going to be pleasant, coming back with no place to call home. The house was rented. He wondered when the month was up. Maybe if he could get a few fights, he could establish himself in the city and keep the house going. The furniture belonged to his aunt. It was his now, not that it was worth much. Perhaps if he could persuade Highway to throw in with him, things wouldn't be so bad. He had conceived a very high opinion of his bearded companion.

He was a queer bird, Jimmie thought. Not because he wandered the roads. Jimmie did that himself and liked it. But it seemed odd that a man who knew so much should have put his knowledge to such profitless uses. He knew a great deal about things Jimmie had never given a thought to. Politics, history, trade and all that. Not just local things, but big stuff. When he got talking he made you see a picture which took in all the world at once.

He seemed to have something against houses. Didn't like being shut in, he said. It had taken all Jimmie's persuasive powers to get him into the city. The memory made him a bit doubtful about persuading Highway to settle down and help run the house. No harm trying, though. You'd think a man who must be past fifty would be glad of a permanent roof over his head. But he was hard as iron. Wind and legs both sound so perhaps he'd keep tramping for years.

He was clean, too. Every day, somehow, he managed to find plenty of water to bathe. His clothes were always brushed, his linen washed. The queerest chap Jimmie had ever known, and the nicest. He suddenly realized Highway was beckoning him.

He was standing at the entrance to the Palling garden when Jimmie got to him. "This is where the doctor lives, isn't it?" Jimmie nodded. "Do you think you could slip in there and take a look around the garden for me?"

"Why don't you go yourself?"

"You'd cause less resentment, I fancy. Do you know what zinnias look like?"

"Zinnias? Oh, you mean those daisy things. Sure, I know them."

Highway studied the green shadows. "There were some in your aunt's basket, but I couldn't find any in her garden. Sweet peas, too. I'd like to know where they came from. If you don't find any in here, try the other gardens." He strolled slowly along the street, leaving Jimmie staring after him. Smart, he thought. He'd never seen Sarah Reckon in his life, but he'd found out already she raided her neighbour's gardens.

The street was becoming unpleasantly hot and the green garden looked correspondingly attractive. He sauntered along the paths until, in their aimless way, they had taken him out of sight of both gateway and the Palling house. He realized he rather liked the task. It gave him an excuse to be in the Palling's garden. At first he couldn't understand why being there should be cause for pleasure. Then, suddenly, he remembered the woman who had been standing at the door when he first saw Dr. Palling.

There didn't seem to be any zinnias but there were plenty of roses. That was natural, of course. Roses bloomed all winter in California.

Presently he found a bench and sat down. From somewhere in the shrubbery he could hear the tinkling notes of water falling in a fountain basin. The sunlight, hot in the street, was filtered here by the trees. He hoped no one would find him for a while.

Absently, he fumbled through his pockets, searching for a cigarette. He found one in a crumpled package and lit it. Idly, he watched the blue smoke drift slowly along the path, carried by an air current so faint he could not feel it on his cheek. Only the effort of holding the cigarette kept him from falling asleep. He nodded two or three times and was just drifting into complete surrender when he became aware, somehow, that he was no longer alone.

He sat up, looking quickly around. The cigarette lay where it had fallen on the gravel path, a thin tracer of smoke still rising. He listened intently, hearing only the murmur of doves and the tinkle of the fountain waters. The splashing was even clearer, he thought, than it had been. Suddenly he understood. The run of water notes was louder because someone was splashing in the fountain.

Noiselessly he rose to his feet, intending to leave the garden unseen. The movement raised his eyes to a higher level so he could look over and through a barrier of intervening leaves. What he saw stopped him abruptly. A woman, partially disrobed, stood with her back to him. She was drawing a naked arm back and forth through the waters of the fountain basin.

Jimmie recognized Violet Palling. She was not more than twenty feet away, standing in a little pool of sunlight. While he watched, she shook the moisture from her arm and reached long fingers into the mass of her hair, removing the pins so that it fell in a dark cloud, almost veiling her shoulders. Fascinated, he continued to watch. With quick movements, she shifted the straps of her slip, dropping it down over her hips. He watched the curving play of limbs through the dusky curtain of hair as it rippled

in the sun. When she stood up after dropping the garment, she was invisible from the hips downward, but he knew by the way she lifted her arms, catching and throwing back her hair, that she was now entirely nude.

For a moment she stood, head thrown back, looking at the distant tops of the trees. Then she stepped up to the invisible rim of the stone basin, revealing the entire figure, long and graceful, with the dark hair falling below her buttocks. For a space, while Jimmie's heart beat rapidly, she balanced. Then she stepped forward and downward, gliding out of sight. He heard the rustling of water as she immersed herself. It was intermingled with low, throaty laughter. He felt the blood pounding in his face and his eyes blurred. Before he knew what he was doing, he stepped across the path and started to force his way through the intervening shrubbery.

It was only when a branch whipped sharply across his face that he realized what he was doing. Suddenly scared, he stopped, trying to control his breathing, hoping desperately the noise of his blundering approach had been hidden by the splashing water. The silence was suddenly complete. There was no sound from the unseen basin. The woman must have heard me, he thought. She's down there, scared. Why doesn't she scream or something?

Try as he would, his sharp eyes could not pierce the barrier. That was lucky, he thought. If he couldn't see, it stood to reason she couldn't see him either. If he could only turn and steal away, unseen, she need never know he had seen her, never know who he was. He stood staring towards the fountain whose slender pinnacle rose above the huge leaves of an elephant's ear plant. He was waiting for the sound of water splashing to cover his intended retreat.

On the top of the fountain pinnacle was a round silver ball. It reflected, in miniature, a delicate reproduction of green verdure and the blue sky. As Jimmie turned to begin his retreat, his eye detected a sudden movement mirrored in the brilliant mercury. It was down towards the curving under side. Startled, he leaned forward again, staring intently. One side of the octagonal fountain basin was visible, its grey stone embracing what seemed to be a brilliant chip of emerald water. Floating on that emerald chip, delicately miniature, was the figure of a woman.

The mercury-ball made a perfect reducing mirror. It was the movement of an arm made in keeping afloat which had caught his eye. For a space he continued to stare at that fascinating vision, all thought of flight forgotten. Without moving his feet, he leaned forward to the utmost point of balance. His movement was reflected in the mercury-ball, and with a sudden rush of fear he realized the truth. If he could see the woman, she also, if her eyes remained open, must be able to see him. The knowledge brought home the danger of his position. Jimmie Lane, fighter, caught spying on a woman in her own garden. He liked headlines, but not that kind.

By raising slightly the level of his gaze, he looked directly into his own eyes. Head and shoulders, reduced to miniature, were visible above the leaves of the elephant's ear plant. Fascinated, he continued to gaze. Had Violet Palling seen him? If she had,

she certainly took her time to indicate any sense of fear or even displeasure. Except for an occasional lazy movement of one arm to maintain her position, semi-submerged in that chip of azure, she remained motionless. There was no attempt at concealment, no effort to float further around the basin where she would have vanished from the mercury-ball. Neither was there an outcry.

Whether or not Mrs. Palling saw him he did not know. Certain he was that he saw her. The desire to plunge forward rose overwhelmingly.

It was the voice which saved him, a low, husky music, coming apparently from nowhere. For a moment he thought himself discovered. Then he realized the voice came from Violet Palling. She was singing softly as she floated. Relaxed, he listened to the words. If she sang thus, she could have no knowledge of his presence. He could enjoy the vision a little longer.

She sang in a low disturbing fashion. The words themselves were suggestive, but the music was even more so. It had a strange huskiness. It was like an invitation to forget there was anything in the world but desire. Jimmie felt sick and tormented. He knew all he had to do was take three long steps forward and that tiny doll in the mercury would be transformed into a woman. Almost, it seemed to him, he could detect in the sun-warmed motionless air the perfume of her clothes which must be lying on the ground beside the fountain. It was at this precise moment that Violet Palling raised a hand to her lips and unmistakably blew him a kiss!

For a moment Jimmie felt that queer dizziness he had known once or twice in the ring when someone clipped him viciously on the chin. He experienced the same instinct to back pedal and cover up until his head cleared. Motionless in the pool, she had been watching him ever since he stopped facing the barrier of elephant's ear leaves. If he had any doubts, they were dispelled by a little murmur of laughter.

The tiny figure moved in the water, turning and disturbing the azure. The reflection became confused, a mane of tawny hair floating across it as she started to rise. Jimmie realized he was no longer looking at a miniature reflection in a mercury-ball, but at the smiling face of Violet Palling, life-size, above the green barrier. As she raised a thin dressing-gown of pale blue fabric and slipped her arms into it, he knew he had not been mistaken about the perfume. It came to him in a wave, a fragrant carnation invitation sped by the slow, intimate smile. Without pause, he plunged forward through the heavy leaves. The woman's lips sought his with hungry ferocity. In that last second before her face came too close for his eyes to see, he thought it was suddenly transformed into one of those furies he had seen masked on the arches of theatres. The realization of his folly mingled with an acute sense of danger. Through the thin stuff of her robe, he felt her knees, thrust against his, threatening to throw him to the ground. He fought to maintain his balance.

"Hit me. Hit me hard."

"Someone'll see us, Violet."

"You sissy! Hit me. Damn it, *use your fists!*"

He felt her nails rake his cheek. He realized with a sudden surge of anger he must master her or she would leave her marks upon him for life.

CHAPTER NINE

THIRTY FEET ABOVE THE GROUND, Kitty McKay felt the rough bark of the sycamore tree under her hands as she clung to the main trunk. Curious to know how much "Face" Gordon could see in her bedroom, she had climbed to his favourite vantage point. It wasn't very pleasant being spied upon, but she was more than half-way convinced "Face" couldn't see much anyway. She was too close to tom-boy passages in her own youth not to feel some sympathy for the bizarre impulses of the young. Now, absorbed in the spectacle below, she had forgotten why she was there.

Through a long telescope of leaves and branches she looked down into the Palling garden, watching the struggle between Jimmie Lane and Violet Palling. Her first impulse had been to escape, but a natural curiosity held her motionless. Mrs. Violet Palling was nothing if not thorough, she reflected. She would not have been a woman if she had not been thrilled by the scandalous nature of this unexpected knowledge of her neighbour. At the same moment she permitted virtuous condemnation to dominate her mind, she was conscious of annoyance because the leaves interfered with a clearer view.

Kitty leaned far out as she dared. She was young enough to be shocked and old enough to experience a sense of mischievous amusement. She turned her head away, burying her face against the tree.

"Nice neighbours Mr. Sleep has," she thought. "The woman's married too."

Presently she felt sufficiently armoured to look again. The figures were motionless, seated side by side on the edge of the fountain basin. Kitty leaned against the rough trunk looking upwards through the leaves to the distant sky. One hand brushed back the red hair which had fallen over her forehead.

In her mind she had gone back to the callow youth who had attempted once to make love to her. She had repulsed him, although scarcely aware why she did so. She wondered what she would have done if the youth had looked like Violet's friend. She recognized him from Mr. Sleep's description. Sarah Reckon's nephew, the fighter.

While she studied him, her hand continued to stroke the red hair. She wondered what it would be like to have a man's hand drawn through it. Not any man. That man down there. She leaned away from the trunk, watching.

She could see Violet's lips move and the animation of her face as she spoke, but the distance was too great to hear. She began to be afraid one of them would look up and see her face framed at the end of the leafy telescope. Cautiously she began to edge around, preparing to descend.