



ALDERLY - PLAN OF FIRST FLOOR

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Storm Over Alderley

It was half-past one the following morning when the storm broke over Alderley. It was still raging half an hour later when, just as the stable clock struck two, Gerry opened the door of her L-shaped bedroom on the inner corner of the main and west corridors. She had a small electric torch in her hand. She slipped out, closed the door quietly behind her and turned right down the west corridor towards the rear of the house. She was wearing a dressing gown and bedroom slippers. On the right almost at the end of the corridor, just before the stairs, there was a narrow curtained recess, where the maids kept cleaning equipment. Gerry pulled back the curtain, squeezed herself in, and drew the curtain again, leaving just a half-inch gap. She was a little way past the door to the Baroness's bedroom, which was on the other side of the corridor. Gerry flashed her torch once at the door, to get its exact position fixed in her mind, then switched off.

The clouds that night were so thick that even though the curtains on the nearby window at the end of the corridor were not drawn, she could now see virtually nothing. Then a flash of lightning lit the corridor brilliantly for a fraction of a

second before plunging it back into what seemed an even deeper darkness.

Gerry settled down to wait.

As it happened, she did not have to wait long. She had been in the recess no more than three minutes when she heard the click of the Baroness's door knob. In vain Gerry strained her eyes. She heard a very slight rustle of clothing, and groaned inwardly. Why did this of all nights have to be so maddeningly dark?

Then there came light. The dim light of a torch. Gerry could just see that it was held by Anilese, and that she was gliding hurriedly away down the corridor. She was dressed in a flowing white *négligée* and her feet were bare. Gerry slipped from her hiding-place and followed.

Like a white ghost the Baroness flitted silently along. She rounded the corner into the main corridor, Gerry about ten yards behind. Then, as Gerry herself was about to go round, she heard a faint, indefinable sound from somewhere ahead of her. She paused momentarily before peering round the corner. The light from the Baroness's torch had vanished. Gerry swore under her breath. She stood still, biting her lip in frustration. A minute elapsed. Then a particularly vivid flash of lightning shining through a high window lit up the main corridor just long enough for her to see that it was quite empty.

The Baroness might have gone anywhere in the house. Gerry had no means whatsoever of telling where. She'd probably lost her chance of finding out anything of importance. But she wasn't going to admit complete defeat yet – at least she could find out what time Anilese went back.

Gerry returned to her niche.

She had hardly time to settle herself, when she heard another noise in the corridor. This time it was clearly the sound of footsteps – and they were approaching. They grew closer.

They sounded like a man's. Then a torch flashed – on and off, quickly. It was held low, and all Gerry could see was the lower half of a pair of trousered legs. Just outside the Baroness's door the torch flashed again. Then there came the click of the door knob, and silence once more. Gerry withdrew into the recess, pulled the curtain, and flashed on her own torch for a quick look at her wrist watch. It was just coming up to seven minutes past two. She resumed her vigil.

About half a minute after this she saw Anilese's white figure returning. Gerry drew well back until once more she heard the door open and close. Now she faced an awkward decision. She ached to know what was being said inside the room. It was unlikely that, even with her ear to the keyhole, she would be able to hear anything significant. But there was a possibility of hearing something. It should be worth a try. Yet, even though originally a gate-crasher, the Baroness was now a guest at Alderley; and both by instinct and training Gerry rebelled violently against the idea of deliberately eavesdropping on anybody, let alone a visitor to her home. So far she'd only spied on what went on in the open corridor.

However, the problem was solved for her, because the next moment the storm, which so far had consisted of heavy rain, lightning, and distant rumblings, now unleashed its full blast. Gerry had rarely heard thunder like it. It would obviously prevent her hearing anything else, however close she got to the door.

Another four or five minutes passed. Then during a

momentary break in the thunder, she heard again the click of the Baroness's door. Gerry strained her eyes hopelessly in the darkness. Then, as before, a shaded torch, held low, flashed briefly, showing the man's legs retreating along the corridor. Twice more it flickered, each time revealing the man farther away.

Briefly, Gerry considered following. But it was Anilese she was chiefly interested in, and she stayed where she was.

It was a decision she was bitterly to regret before twenty-four hours had passed.

The probability now was that everything which was going to happen had happened. If so, she'd been wasting her time. Should she pack up? Bed was awfully inviting. She flashed her torch and sneaked another peep at her watch. Not yet quarter-past. She'd stay until half-past, as she'd planned.

'Blast all Baronesses,' Gerry said under her breath.



The alarm clock under Giles Deveraux's pillow went off shrilly. He awoke at once and stopped it. Almost two-twenty. Deveraux swung himself off the bed. He was dressed in dark slacks, a sweater, and rubber-soled shoes. He picked up a torch from the bedside table and left the room.

He turned east along the main corridor, stopping momentarily outside the door of each occupied bedroom that he passed and listening intently for a few seconds during the lulls in the thunder. He walked the full length of the main and east corridors and at the far end of the latter took the stairs to the ground floor.

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Deveraux was unaware of it, but ten yards behind, a dark figure followed him down.

For several minutes all was still in the east corridor. Then, very slowly, the door of the picture gallery was opened from the inside.



Jane stood just inside the door of her bedroom, straining her ears, and mentally cursed the thunder and rain that were preventing her hearing properly. What on earth was going on out there?

She had been awake all night so far. Actually, when she had first gone to her room, she hadn't really expected to be able to sleep. However, after reading for a while she had dutifully turned out the light. But she had soon switched on again and picked up her book.

It had been sultry when she had gone to bed, and she had left the door open an inch in the hope of getting a draught through the room. It was some time later that she had become aware, between thunderclaps, of a lot of movement about the house. She told herself that others, obviously, would be kept awake by the storm and be restless, and it was merely her imagination which made their movements seem somehow furtive.

But then she had heard a sound both strange and alarming: the door of the picture gallery, across the corridor from her room, opening and closing again.

Clearly nobody would be looking at pictures this time of night. On the other hand, the gallery did house a number of

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valuable paintings. And beyond the gallery were the Earl's guns. So she couldn't just ignore the sound.

Thus it was that Jane, who had put on a dressing gown and slippers, was now standing with her ear close against her bedroom door, wondering what to do.

Very soon afterwards the noise came again. And following it she was almost certain she heard the sound of footsteps receding.

Jane took a deep breath, grasped the knob, and peeped out. She could see nothing. She waited, quite still and quiet for several seconds, then stepped into the corridor.



Giles Deveraux was walking lightly up the main stairs when he heard the stable clock strike two-thirty. As the chimes ceased, he heard another sound. He froze and extinguished his torch, for the sound was that of footsteps. They were coming along the main corridor, approaching the head of the stairs from the right. Deveraux stood, holding his breath, as the footsteps got closer. He heard them cross the landing and continue along the corridor towards the west wing. He waited until they'd gone about ten yards, then ran quietly up the remaining stairs himself and, hoping against hope he wouldn't run into anything in the dark, turned in the same direction.

He hadn't taken more than half a dozen paces along the corridor when he heard another small noise – this time behind him. He started to swing round, saw a bright beam of light out of the corner of his eye – and felt a glancing blow on the head.

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If Deveraux had not started to turn, the blow would undoubtedly have knocked him out. As it was, he avoided the full force of it. However, it was still powerful enough to bring him to his knees, dazed and half-stunned. Before he could begin to recover, he felt hands grab him from behind. He flinched, waiting for another blow, but all that happened was that his assailant tried to pull him sideways. Unable to resist adequately, Deveraux half-fell on his side. The hands took a fresh grip and gave him another heave. Slowly, Deveraux's senses were beginning to come back to him. From the floor he struck out. He had the satisfaction of feeling his fist make contact. But it was a feeble blow and only deterred his attacker for a second. Then he grabbed Deveraux again.

Deveraux was gathering his diminished strength for another punch, when from nearby came a sudden series of bumps and bangs. Although close, they were not particularly loud, and even in his fuddled state, he realised that their source was either Adler's room, or Gerry's. It sounded like some sort of fight. Furniture was being overturned and bodies were crashing about.

The noise stopped as abruptly as it had begun. And at the same instant Deveraux realised that he was alone. He lay still, trying to make his brain work. For a few seconds all was silence. Even the thunder had stopped. Then Deveraux heard hurried footsteps approaching. They blundered past him in the darkness, going east.

It was at that moment he heard the woman's scream.

