
The Trail of the Black King

I

THE BLACK KING

TWO men faced one another from large armchairs in a room furnished half as an office, half as a luxurious sitting-room. One was the man known to the police of London—unfortunately so far by repute only—as the “Black King,” the cleverest and most successful of big-scale blackmailers that the Yard had ever had to deal with; the other was his lieutenant, the head, so to speak, of his executive branch. At the moment they were evidently deep in some important piece of business, for their faces were earnest and cigar smoke hung in heavy layers in the air or drifted lazily out of the window into the still sunshine of a hot September morning.

“Well, that’s settled,” said the Black King, rising. “This fellow is to be our next.” He tossed over a slip of paper on which a name was written. “He should be dead easy, because we have good documentary proofs.” He tapped an envelope significantly before rising and putting it away under a letter in a small file cabinet, which at a touch swung inward to the wall with a click of a secret lock and became an Encyclopædia Britannica. “Get the typewriter!” he continued, reseating himself.

The other turned to a small typewriter on a secretary’s

6 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

side-table, drew on a pair of rubber gloves and slipped a sheet of paper between the rollers.

"I hope this man is safe?" he asked, with a touch of apprehension.

"Have I ever failed?" asked the Black King simply. "Yet each time you ask the same question."

"That Sleemouth mess ——" began the other.

"Fool! That was not failure. We dropped the matter too soon to *fail*. Now type this! Make the adjustments first, you imbecile!" he snapped, as the other put his fingers on the keys. "You talk of safety; well, you won't be safe, if you forget the precautions."

His subordinate shrugged his shoulders, and using a small paper-knife as a hammer he turned the typewriter carriage back and tapped busily for a minute somewhere inside the machine.

"Ready now," he said.

The "Black King" paused a moment, head on one side, and dictated:

"You have conveniently forgotten the Hotel England at Brighton in the year 1912. I have, however, in my possession some documents which, alas, would recall the whole affair to anyone to whom I chose to give or sell them. If you wish to know my terms be outside Warwick Avenue Tube Station at eleven-thirty Thursday night and get into the closed car which will stop there. You will only communicate with the police at risk of instant exposure."

"I hope he won't," murmured the other, as the rattle of the machine ceased.

"Bah! That kind will do anything rather than that. He'll pay like a lamb. Finish up as usual."

The man at the table typed in capitals "THE BLACK KING" at the bottom of the sheet and drew it out. Not till it was safely in an addressed envelope did he take

off the gloves and then, picking up the paper-knife, he once more tapped busily at the same internal part of the typewriter.

“Good! See that he gets it before this afternoon!” He broke off suddenly as a small light glowed on the wall opposite, and picking up a pair of earphones he put them on and listened silently for a minute.

“Anything?” asked his accomplice.

“Nothing at all. Well, well, now I must go to my work.” He rose and went to the door, which a close observer might have noted had no keyhole and was fitted with sound-proof lining.

“When do we meet next?” asked the other.

“Same time to-morrow,” replied the Black King.
“Go down the private way.”

He opened the door and went out.

II

A TAXI AND A LUNCH

A GIRL hesitated on the pavement of Compton Street, Soho, and stared about her as if looking for someone. She was nineteen, slim and upright as a willow wand, with a frank open face and big gentian-blue eyes. Many impressionable Italian hearts thrilled at the sight of her, and a fair-haired young Englishman at her elbow, about to cross the road, seized the opportunity to indulge in an approving but surreptitious stare.

Next moment his long arm shot out, caught the girl by the elbow and pulled her to him. Amazement and anger passed over her pretty face to give way finally to realization. Without thinking she had started suddenly across the road, and only his prompt but rough action had kept her from walking in front of a taxicab, the driver of which fluently cursed the vagaries of wonderful woman and thereafter passed out of her life.

"Steady on, what?" reproved the young man.

"I say, thanks awfully! What a fool I was not to look!" She regarded her rescuer frankly and observed with disfavor a grey suit, spats, buttonhole and a malacca cane—altogether a perfect example of the vacuous young man about town. Then she looked again into his eyes and perceived, as several unscrupulous gentlemen had done too late for their own advantage, that his outward appearance was highly misleading.

"Charging about like that!" he continued severely. "Might have landed me as a witness for an inquest. Dashed inconsiderate!"

The girl laughed. For all his flippant manner she was beginning to like the young man. And certainly his action had been anything but flippant. She had been snapped to his side as if by a steel spring. Her bare arm in the short-sleeved frock showed red where he had grasped it. She rubbed the place, watching him as she did so.

"Sudden death might have been less painful," she observed, and he was at once all contrition.

"I say, I'm fearfully sorry and all that. Only one thing to do to put myself right."

"What's that?"

"Treat you to lunch."

"But it's me that's under an obligation to you!"

"Then lunch with me. . . . Here! Taxi! . . . Hop in!"

Again the girl laughed. She was highly intrigued. She was a reader of sensational fiction and always had liked the type that concealed beneath an apparently shallow exterior a masterful way of rescuing damsels from under taxis and whirling them off to lunch. Also she was only nineteen and had been unconventionally brought up. So she hopped in.

"Where are we going?" she asked, and at that moment the taxi stopped.

"Here, old thing!"

"But, my dear boy, why on earth did you take a cab to go fifty yards?"

"To reestablish your sense of superiority over taxis. Otherwise you'd have had an inferiority complex for the rest of your life. . . . Hop out!"

The girl, whose sole relation was an adoring father, easily handled, found his masterful manner both novel and exciting. She hopped out.

"My name," said the young man, as he joined her,

10 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

"is Hyslop. Harry Hyslop, but my friends call me H. H. And yours?"

"Betty," she was beginning, when he held up his hand.

"No more! Don't spoil it! Now, Betty, hold your breath! We are about to lunch at the Taverna Medicea and there is our nice Mr. Barberi waiting to recommend us his very special dishes. . . . Hop along! . . ."

Betty hopped along.

.

The Taverna Medicea of Frith Street is one of the pleasantest little restaurants in London. It is small but comfortable; it is friendly, quiet and well brought up; and it does not, like so many pretentious Soho eating places, try to be about half-a-dozen things which it isn't and thus achieve only a universal mediocrity. It has no fixed lunch or dinner menu—one must order always from the *carte*; and so at least the place will never come to be dominated by that millstone around the neck of every other small restaurant in the neighborhood—the standardized *table d'hôte*. The cuisine is strictly Italian, the wine-list predominantly so, the decorations are tastefully in period. In short it is a find which its habitués hope will never be found by others, for the young proprietor, Mr. Barberi, knows his limits and aims at perfection between them. Which is why it is really a great pity that young people who are more interested in each other than in their food should ever go there.

"But you haven't told me yet anything about *yourself*," objected Betty, stabbing almost petulantly at her food. "You're simply being evasive."

"And why not, old thing?" replied Hyslop. "We meet—in an informal manner. You apparently consider yourself under a slight obligation to me. We find our-

selves lunching together—in an even more informal manner; and now you want me to tell you the Story of my Life. Dash it, we ought to be introduced first.”

“Well, I’ve told you about my life.”

“And a very nice life, too. But how do you know *mine* is? I might be a reformed criminal.”

“Oh, don’t be silly.”

Harry Hyslop sighed. This was all very difficult, for as it happened he *was* a reformed criminal, having been sent down in disgrace from Oxford and only escaping jail for forgery by the clemency of his guardian, an uncle, who, however, cast him off with ignominy. After which he had lived shadily in the underworld on the combination of his wits and his appearance, till he had met the famous ex-crook Jimmie Rezaire and finally had joined with him in a private and somewhat unorthodox detective agency.

“You’re not a soldier, or a business man, or a lawyer—I believe you’re just one of the idle rich,” accused the girl.

“Neither idle nor rich—and I may say that I’m not certain whether I really want to know a girl who can talk when she should be giving her whole attention to the most perfect dish in London. *Sole morosini*.”

Betty laughed and was silent for a while. Later she said suddenly:

“But *are* you one of the idle rich, really? They invariably deny it.”

Hyslop sighed. “I suppose,” he said to himself, “it’s just that I don’t *look* truthful. Otherwise you’d never doubt my word in that brazen way.” He beckoned the waiter. “After this we will have some of the special cheese—*mascarpone* it’s called, and you eat it with sugar and ground coffee and . . .”

“I ask about your life and you talk about cheese,”

12 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

cried Betty, who under the influence of the situation and perhaps a bottle of *Broglia Rosso* was rapidly on the way to becoming very romantic indeed over this young stranger. "Do tell me what you are."

Hyslop sighed again. "Very well. You won't believe me, but I'm a private detective."

Betty clapped her hands with delight.

"Marvellous!" she cried, "where's your bowler hat?"

"My face is my fortune," grinned Hyslop. "You see, no one could look at me and think I was anything but a Wodehouse Wooster—the kind of boob who'd lend money to total strangers he met in hotel lounges."

"Do you have an exciting time? Or dull?"

"Occasionally chappies get a bit above themselves," admitted Hyslop modestly, and smiled as he recalled some of the more thrilling episodes in which he and Jimmie Rezaire had figured.

"What kind of jobs do you have to do?"

"Actually I and another man—my boss so to speak—specialize in detective work on behalf of people who, while genuinely in need of skilled help, for some reason or other don't wish to call in the police. In blackmail cases for instance. The mottoes of our firm are 'No Questions Asked'—except necessary ones of course—and 'Justice Before Legality.' See!"

"I see. I should love to be in on things like that. Only nothing ever happens in *my* life."

"You never know! When it does, mind you send for little H. H. . . . Here's the card! Rezaire, 15, Somerset Mansions. Promise you will!"

Betty tucked the card away and rose airily. "I promise. You're a good business man you know."

"Sometimes business is a pleasure."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Well, it was meant to be a compliment, don't you know. I thought it good."

"Rotten!" rejoined the girl frankly. "Well, I can face the world and possible blackmailers now with a brave heart." She smiled at him again, looking very young and fresh. "Do you know, I'm jolly glad I nearly got run over by that taxi. I think it was fate."

"Call it chance," said Hyslop, with a little smile.

"Is it always chance that leads you to ask girls you have rescued to lunch at the nearest restaurant?"

"The nearest *decent* restaurant, old thing. Molaro's is actually the nearest. Anyway it was chance that you were free."

"It wasn't," retorted Betty. "As a matter of fact I'd promised to meet an old school friend for lunch at Molaro's, but she never turned up. So there! It definitely *was* fate," she concluded very gravely, and then, surprised at her own seriousness, turned with a hasty, "Good-bye and thank you," and went out of the restaurant.

It took Hyslop, staring in a more than ordinary vacuous manner at the space so recently and charmingly filled, five minutes to realize that he had not got her address.

Mr. Barberi, strolling about his restaurant as usual in the manner of a vague client who is so charmed by the place that he just has to look in to watch it working, smiled knowingly to himself.

III

THE NEW VICTIM

THE Granada Restaurant was one of the most fashionable restaurants of London. Through its big swing doors, in and out of its richly carpeted lounges, with their demure palm-trees and inviting armchairs, to and from its refined cocktail-bar, and between its white and shining tables set at so discreet a distance, moved each London season the most notable, if not always the most aristocratic, of Society. For those who could afford it the Granada was perfect. There was no hot smell of food, no offensively loud orchestra, no excited or inattentive waiting; above all no sense of rush. The service was exactly right, the food was good, even though the Granada's enormous *cachet* almost obviated that necessity, and its prices were so stupendous as to attract the millionaires of every nation. For three years it had held pride of place among London's restaurants, and under the subtle genius of Jean-Marie the world famous *chef* in the kitchens, and the all pervading influence of Signor Domani the equally famous *maitre d'hôtel* above, it looked like continuing to do so for many years to come.

In a corner of the Granada, less crowded than usual that September day, sat by himself a short middle-aged man with drooping moustache and a fierce, almost arrogant, gaze, which now and then left his plate to look round the room. He seemed of the crowd and yet not of it, though at least he was a regular customer, for Signor Domani himself graciously paused and remarked on the

weather before passing on to another table, where he informed a favored American financier that the solitary gentleman with the hard face was Monsieur Naylor, whose rapid rise via City speculation from still unpenetrated obscurity to considerable wealth had been a newspaper sensation some years previously. The American absorbed this with interest—he himself had flourished in a night—and then moved on to questions about other lunchers. All of which Signor Domani, a veritable encyclopædia of scandal and information largely disreputable and unrepeatable, guardedly answered with his bland yet cynical smile and his deferential “As Monsieur wishes” at any difference of opinion.

The curiosity of the American momentarily satisfied, the sleek, smooth-faced Signor Domani in his perfectly fitting clothes was moving onwards, outwardly serene in appearance, inwardly calculating the genuineness of the relationships, morals, or pearls of the lunchers, when he was touched on the sleeve by a respectful hall-porter from his own swing-doors.

“Well?” snapped Signor Domani in an undertone, his suaveness dropping from him like a garment.

“A gentleman left this letter, sir, at the side entrance.” He proffered a small envelope. “For a Mr. Naylor, who was lunching here. I’m afraid I don’t know Mr. Naylor by sight and . . .”

“He’s a regular client. Why the devil do you not use your eyes?” grumbled Domani. “That is what you are there for. . . . Here, give it me.”

Letter delicately held in thumb and forefinger, for this was indeed condescension on the great man’s part, Signor Domani steered between the tables and the busy waiters till he reached Naylor’s side.

“A letter has been left for Monsieur,” he murmured, and departed politely.

16 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

A moment later he was back at his customer's side in some apprehension. For Naylor's face had gone ashy grey, till the drooping moustaches stood out as if they were false, and his throat was working up and down. Moreover, fear looked out from his once truculent eyes.

"Monsieur is unwell? . . . Quick, Alphonse! Water!" Skilfully the *maitre d'hôtel* interposed his short, stout form between Naylor and the rest of his clients; for any sort of scene was bad for the Granada. "Monsieur has not received ill news, I hope? . . ."

"It's—it's nothing," stammered Naylor, recovering. With trembling hands he put the typewritten sheet he had received into an inner pocket, drank some water, and passed a silk handkerchief across his forehead.

Then he rose from his chair but at once sat down again heavily. Signor Domani became anxious. The other looked as if he might faint, and one was not allowed to faint at the Granada.

"You come along to the secretary's office, Monsieur, and rest?" he suggested kindly; and, piloted gladly but unobtrusively by Domani, Naylor passed from the room.

Signor Domani lived in some luxury on the second floor of the Granada's massive ornateness where the proprietor himself also had a suite; but the secretary's office was a queer, austere furnished room situated on the first floor, as was the restaurant, the ground-floor being occupied by the hardly less magnificent Grill Room. Naylor sat down in a chair, as the suave Italian insisted, but by that time he was himself again; even after the blow of having his past, dead and buried for years, leap suddenly at him from a typewritten page. Anger moreover was replacing his fear.

"Who gave you that note, Signor Domani?" he asked abruptly.

"It was brought to the door, I understand." He

pressed a bell, and ordered the commissionaire from the side entrance to be sent for at once.

"It's very important indeed," snapped Naylor, speaking half to himself, as the messenger left the room.

"Then, one moment, Monsieur," said Domani magnificently. "I will go and interview him myself. Monsieur will wait?"

In five minutes he returned.

"The fool," he said bitterly, "cannot recall who gave him the letter for you—except that it was a man, a gentleman, in a black suit. But I hope it is not bad news?"

Naylor drew a deep breath and looked fiercely round. "Yes," he said. "Damn bad news!" A desire to share with some other human being his sudden rage against the unknown came upon him. "It's—it's an attempt at blackmail," he spluttered.

"Blackmail! But, Monsieur, impossible."

"Nothing seems impossible to this Black King," cut in Naylor savagely.

"*Dio!* The Black King!" Domani drew back a pace. "That ruffian. But surely Monsieur has not . . ."

"We all make mistakes." He jerked the words out as if they were a challenge. "We forget and we think all is forgotten and then one day . . ." He straightened his shoulders. "But I'm damned if I'll be beaten by these scoundrels."

The other shook his head solemnly. "You will be, Monsieur, by the Black King. I have read the papers. He is too powerful. Look at his record of the last two years. He has never left a trace, never been caught. His victims have always paid—or wished they had."

"Don't you think he could be beaten?" asked Naylor.

Domani shrugged his shoulders, and what was almost an imploring look came into his eyes.

18 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

“Lady Sleemouth used to come here, once, Monsieur—and now she does not. I have seen much, here in my restaurant, and I know.”

Naylor controlled his outburst and sat for a moment in thought. Domani’s earnest words had carried conviction, and he wondered if the other were right. Domani probably was aware of facts about these recent big blackmail cases that the papers had never heard of. In his obscure past, unguessed at by the papers, Naylor himself had once been a waiter, and he knew that unexpected knowledge came to the ears of those who served in hotels and restaurants. Yes, Domani had seen much and knew much. He was in all probability right. Abruptly Naylor stood up—Domani was no doubt right, but his anger surged back upon him.

“I’m damned if I’ll pay a cent,” he said between his teeth. “Or if I do, I’ll get even with them.”

Signor Domani shrugged his shoulders. “As Monsieur wishes,” he said, and added: “Will you call in the police?”

The financier hesitated; then fingered a paper-weight. “No,” he said. “I wish to hell I could.”

He strode to the door, fists clenched at his side. Signor Domani bowed him out and went about his own affairs. He did not point out that the lunch bill had not been settled. It was part of his business to know exactly whom he could trust and whom he could not.

IV

JIMMIE REZAIRE

SOMERSET MANSIONS, a big block of flats near Regents Park, London, rear their red brick façade and innumerable windows seven stories above the quiet roadway in which they stand. There is one big entrance, guarded by a hall-porter, and on each floor, including the basement, there are two flats opening from either side of the central staircase and lift well. The flats are large, almost luxurious, and are much sought after; yet by a coincidence the top flat on the western side, No. 15, and the one directly below it, No. 13, had both fallen vacant together about a year previously. Barely two months afterwards the tenant of No. 11 sold his lease at a handsome premium to a very old, very deaf bachelor, with a torpedo beard and wind-tanned face. His name was Layman and he settled down to live a morose and secluded life under the care of a small and impassive Chinese servant. No. 13 was taken by a young man who soon after moving in discovered himself to be touched with lung trouble, and went to live in Switzerland, leaving the place shut up and only half furnished. No. 15 at the top was taken by Jimmie Rezaire, the one-time crook, who had done so well with his private detective agency that in a burst of extravagance he had moved to Somerset Mansions from his small house in St. John's Wood. The astute head of the small firm whom he engaged after a month or so to redecorate and alter his flat, secured a contract to do up both Nos. 11 and 13 as well, no doubt by offering reduced terms for

20 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

being already on the spot with his men and material; and for some weeks the inhabitants of Nos. 12, 14 and 16 were continually being annoyed by pails, step-ladders and the sound of constant sawing and hammering from the apartments opposite them. It was all very mysterious.

Jimmie Rezaire had by now been in occupation nearly a year, and having been idle for the last three weeks was beginning to hope something new would turn up. His bank balance was not as fat as he liked and his expenses had been heavy lately. He was giving a big salary to his cheery young assistant, Hyslop; he was paying out retaining fees to several others, occasional watchers, and gatherers of information; he had servants, and above all he had Vivienne, his erstwhile partner, and now his wife. Jimmie was at great pains to point out to her that he had taken this latter step to save expenses, not to increase them, Viv herself explained it by saying Jimmie wanted to secure her invaluable help for good, Hyslop called it humorously "love's young dream," while Joe Plumer, the ex-burglar, Jimmie's servant, valet and factotum, who adored Viv, combined all three points of view by referring to it as "a bit of orl right orl round," and was probably correct.

.

Jimmie Rezaire, a small wiry figure, was standing at the window of his study, which was a small room at the back of the flat and was reached by a communicating door through Viv's drawing-room. He was surveying with restless bright eyes London's roofs, grey and hard in the early autumn sun, when he heard the door-bell ring. Next minute Joe Plumer had shown in an extremely attractive girl with a frank open face, large blue eyes and corn-gold hair.

"I'm Betty Naylor," she began, without a trace of shyness. "I met Mr. Hyslop the other day by chance. . . ."

"By *fate* you said, old dear," put in Hyslop, appearing suddenly from the other room. "This is Mr. Rezaire, the Great-White-Chief of our show," he explained, "and this, Jimmie, is the young lady I told you about. I thought she'd passed forever out of my young life."

"What can I do for you?" Jimmie drew forward a chair as he now noticed that the girl's blue eyes held more than a hint of worry.

"I've come about my—my father. I didn't know what else to do and I had the address. Father is terribly bothered and I think he's being blackmailed or something—though of course he won't tell me much. Calls it money trouble, but I know it can't really be that."

"Has *he* sent you—or have you come on your own?" asked Jimmie, observing with a smile that all the time she addressed Hyslop rather than himself.

"At the moment he's so angry that he can hardly think, let alone speak, but I told him about you and he's promised me to ring you up. However, I thought I'd better just come and explain who I was. I hope you didn't mind."

"Not at all. Very natural," murmured Jimmie, restraining himself from a whimsical glance at Hyslop. He had a shrewd suspicion that his visitor might have another reason in coming in person to Somerset Mansions.

"Father will tell you all about it. I believe it's something about a man calling himself the Black King—Why," she broke off, "do you know him?" For both men had suddenly sat upright and a joyous light was in their eyes.

22 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

"Not personally," murmured Hyslop. "But wouldn't we love to?"

"The Black King's the most famous uncaught black-mailer in Europe—and we've been hoping to get a chance to match ourselves against him."

"I'm so glad. You see—Father's very upset . . ."

Jimmie rose and patted the girl's shoulder, for he could see in spite of her apparent cheerfulness that she was very upset herself. "Now don't worry. Just as soon as your father rings up we'll take the job over."

"I *am* grateful," said Betty to Hyslop. "And now I'll go back and . . ."

"I'll come with you," said the young man promptly.

"Heavens, no. I'm all right alone," said Betty, without much conviction and with an inviting smile that completely spoiled what little there was.

"Mark my word," replied the young man solemnly, "there are a lot of dangerous taxis about London. You might get run over."

Jimmie watched them off with a grin and then went into the drawing-room. Here he found his wife on a sofa reading a novel.

"A job, Viv," he said, and added dramatically, "The Black King at last!"

"No!" cried the girl.

"Yes. I'm waiting for the victim to ring up now. It's Naylor, the big financier—the 'mystery millionaire' of the papers."

"I thought the Black King would be cropping up again soon. There's been nothing since the Sleemouth affair in June."

"Yes, we're in luck. Thanks to Hyslop," he added.

"How's that?"

"The girl he told us about the other day—the taxi girl—turns out to be Naylor's daughter. And as far as

I can see, there's only going to be one little hero in this in her eyes and that's H. H."

"He seemed pretty rapturous about her in his description."

"Yes—he's just taken her home in the most barefaced manner. A pretty little thing too. . . . Hullo! There's the phone. If it's Naylor I'll arrange a meeting. In the meantime will you look out all the cuttings and notes about the Black King cases? He's got a wonderfully organized gang with him, so we'll all be in this before we're through. I'm glad we're standing in with the police; we'll probably need their help as well."

"I hate 'em," said Viv laconically.

"Must work with them all the same," called Jimmie, as he went to the telephone.

.
Jimmie Rezaire stood at a prearranged point in Regents Park and watched a short stoutish man come tentatively up to him.

"Mr. Rezaire?"

"That's right, Mr. Naylor," returned Jimmie briskly. "Let's walk across this open grass where we can't be overheard, and then you can tell me all about it. I gather your daughter knows my assistant," he rattled on, to put the other at his ease, "and that's how you came to call us in."

"I'm going to trust you a lot, Mr. Rezaire," said Naylor brusquely at last, after closely studying his companion. "But I don't mind telling you I've made a few inquiries about you, so I've learned you can be trusted." He pulled reflectively at his moustache for another moment. Now that he had taken the definite step of getting in outside help he was much calmer.

"People who come to me have to," replied Jimmie.

24 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

"What I am going to tell you, is a secret which I thought was buried—till this fiend got hold of it—a part of my life which may yet land me in prison."

Jimmie whistled. "Bad as that, eh?"

"Yes." He paused. "Mind you," he said almost aggressively, "my conscience is clear, but the law only reckons with facts as it knows them. And there is my daughter. That's why I dare not go to the police—and this Black King knows it."

"Well?" suggested Jimmie, in a kindly tone. "Suppose you tell me the whole thing. You see—he may just conceivably have no definite proof but be trying to bluff."

Naylor stared straight into Jimmie's eyes for a moment, then drew a deep breath.

"I started life as a deck hand on a liner," he said, "and then I held a steward's job, got fired, was on my beam ends and at last, on my steward's experience, I became a waiter in a Brighton hotel. There I got into bad company, and definitely ended up as one of a gang of jewel thieves, working the hotels."

"Dear, dear!" said Jimmie sympathetically, with the air of one who has never fallen as low as that, though he was recalling the time when he too had been on the wrong side of the law.

"I was the inside worker—knew hotel bedrooms and so on—and was never suspected till in 1912 at the Hotel England in Brighton. One evening I went into a bedroom and had just knocked off some jewelry when I suddenly discovered that the old lady was dead in her bed. I heard some while later that she had died of heart attack, but at the time it was too much for me. I went on the run, with the police after me, wanting to ask questions, and because I had a tidy bit put by I managed to get clear."

He suddenly squared his shoulders and a fighting light came into his eyes.

"I don't suppose in your job you believe much in turning over new leaves and starting again, heh? But I did it. Within two years I restored as far as possible everything I had made illegally—to charities in the cases where I couldn't remember. At the end I was broke. I had a wife who died under it, and a baby girl who, thank God, has now grown up healthy, happy, and ignorant of her father's past. For some years I just existed, but with the knowledge that I had squared up with my conscience; then came the war, and I rose from the ranks and saved a bit." He smiled grimly. "That was as far back in the story of the 'mystery millionaire' as the papers ever got."

He stopped at the edge of a pond and stared solemnly at a duck which stared equally solemnly back at him. Jimmie kept silence, impressed in spite of himself by the simple history of another man's life.

"Do you believe," asked Naylor suddenly, "in the justice of Providence?"

"Not particularly," said Jimmie, hiding a smile. The question seemed so incongruous from this hard-bitten type.

"Well, I do. I joined with a man—a straight fellow—in the City and began to work and to speculate. Out of all those who went under in business after the war, I, with no knowledge or experience and with only my small savings, doubled and trebled my wealth year by year, till I—well, you know what has been in all the papers. And now comes this damned bolt from the blue. Ruin, prison for me, shame for my daughter." He stopped with an abrupt gesture and pulled savagely at his moustache. "And it's so darned *unfair*, damn their souls."

26 THE TRAIL OF THE BLACK KING

"H'm!" said Jimmie at last. "Very nasty. They've got a double hook on you. When did you hear from this Black King?"

"At lunch yesterday." He pulled out the letter, which Jimmie studied carefully and then put away in his pocketbook.

"He says definitely some *documents*, so it looks as if it wasn't a mere bluff for scandal. Have you any idea what documents he means?"

"Might be anything," answered Naylor. "He wouldn't try this on though, unless he *had* something incriminating. . . . Who is this Black King?" he broke off in a sudden flash of fury. "I'd like to snap his dirty neck."

"No one knows," said Jimmie soberly. "But I hope everyone will before I'm through. My one ambition is to land the whole crowd of them."

"Do you really think you'll do that?"

"There's a good chance. Blackmailing is a tricky game to play, however clever the player."

"Well, what am I to do about Warwick Avenue to-morrow night?"

"You leave to-morrow night to me. I'll go on your behalf. I may pick up some clues and at any rate I'll see what he holds against you. I fear though you'll have to cough up."

"Now get me straight from the start, Mr. Rezaire," said the other, fixing Jimmie with his fierce eyes. "I realize that I shall probably have to pay. But that doesn't worry me so much now as the innate unfairness of the thing, and I'm out to land these dirty hounds from now on. And since I can't go to the police at this stage and it'll be too late afterwards for them to do much good, I'll employ you to do it. See?"

"I see quite well." Jimmie's eyes gleamed with the

excitement of the forthcoming battle. "Nothing would suit me better."

"Now I'll pay you £250 down, all expenses, and £500 if you get me even."

"There may be shooting, you know?" suggested Jimmie tentatively. "This highly successful going concern of the Black King's won't let itself be broken up without a good struggle."

"Well then I'll double if they start pulling guns." A vengeful look came into his fierce eyes. "How's that?"

"Done! But, I warn you, expenses will be high. Watchers, helpers, sellers of information—it'll mount up."

"Never mind! I want that hound behind the bars. As I said, I've squared off with my conscience and I won't fall for these dirty tricks."

"Good! As a matter of fact 'Justice Before Legality' is our motto, Mr. Naylor, and your case seems to be made for us. Now I'll report after to-morrow night, and remember your secret is quite safe with me. If I told secrets ever, I'd be out of business in two shakes of a—of a ——" He looked round for inspiration and found it in the duck which was still solemnly regarding them.