
V

CONTACT

THE open mouth of Warwick Avenue Tube Station sent forth its gleam of light and warmth into the night already chilly with autumn. Along the edge of this patch of light a small man with a pronounced stoop amounting almost to a deformed back, and a straggling black moustache, was pacing slowly back and forth, head bent in apparent thought, though his restless bright eyes swept every now and then from side to side. Few would have recognized in this queer creature the wiry, well-made Jimmie Rezaire—but then Rezaire was a master of disguise, having apparently the power of changing his whole personality by the adoption of a moustache and a pad between the shoulders.

At first Rezaire had not intended to disguise himself at all that night, and then he had realized that if he were going to range himself against the Black King and his crowd it would be well worth his while to avoid coming under their observation for as long as possible. Though that would not be for long, he thought grimly, for they were, as Hyslop had said, a pretty slick lot. Their record showed this only too well. For that morning and the evening before, he and Hyslop and Viv had been getting out a résumé of the previous cases and the methods which the Black King employed, and they showed all the precision of perfectly running schemes worked out to the last detail by a master brain. The police had never been able to achieve anything; their clues always led in circles. On one occasion even—the

recent affair of the Countess of Sleemouth—they had tried to lay a trap and the only result had been that the unknown threw the game up in the middle and gave the Sleemouth scandal to the world instead. No, the ingenuity and skill of the Black King were as wonderful as his knowledge of Society's sins and secrets, and Jimmie realized he had a formidable opponent indeed.

His train of thought was abruptly cut as he perceived that a large closed car, a dark-red Sheffield, had drawn silently up by the curb. He turned and walked leisurely towards it, noting as he did so the number XD7503. He reached the door and waited there without a word. He could not make out who was inside, though on the driver's seat there sat a muffled figure in chauffeur's uniform, but wearing his collar turned up and a low-pulled cap.

After a minute the door opened abruptly and a voice said:

"What do *you* want, my man?"

"I'm here on behalf of Mr. Naylor," said Jimmie.

"Who are you? Why didn't he come himself?"

"Never mind who I am. And he didn't come himself because he sent me to represent him," replied Rezaire sharply. He was not going to begin by being bullied, and he knew well that as long as they thought there was the chance of getting money out of Naylor, he had, in a way, the whip hand of them. "I am entirely in Mr. Naylor's confidence," he continued, "and I am here to see the—er—goods offered for sale."

He heard a murmur. Then:

"Get in," said the voice, "and face the rear of the car."

Jimmie got in. The car had stopped in such a position that no light penetrated the interior, and before they moved off close-fitting blinds were drawn over the

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windows. Though he had only heard the one voice, Jimmie, back to the driver, had, however, the immediate impression that there were two men opposite him, an impression which he secretly verified with his knee. The car moved silently off, turning as far as he could make out due west.

"If you've anything to do with the police," said the same harsh voice, "you're wasting your time."

"You know as well as I do Naylor won't go near the police," countered Jimmie affably. "He's more afraid of them than you are."

The other grunted, and then Jimmie heard a sudden little click. It sounded just like a revolver being cocked and his heart jumped into his mouth. Then he reassured himself by recalling that never yet in all their successful business deals had the Black King killed.

A short laugh from the darkness told him that his start had been perceived and understood.

"No guns," said the voice. "I don't mind telling you that click was a device for changing our number plates. If you are cute you'll have taken a note of our car number as you got in. Well, it'll do you no good because it wasn't our real one and we now have another."

Jimmie smiled. A pretty slick crowd indeed!

"Well?" he said. "To business."

"We have here a few papers of decided interest to Mr. Naylor," began the other. "In a moment you may inspect them. But it is no good trying anything funny. My companion here is an ex-pugilist who has specialized in quick knock-outs. Isn't that right, Fred?"

A low chuckle from Jimmie's left front gave acquiescence. "'At's it, guv'nor."

"So remember that." There came a rustle of papers in the darkness. "If you agree," continued the voice, "that your—er—client would wish to buy these fairly

damning pieces of evidence, full written instructions as to payment will be sent him."

With a snap a light was suddenly switched on, a light so placed that while Rezaire in the front seat could see nothing of the men opposite him, his every movement and expression was plainly visible. He blinked and at once bent his head slightly to aid his disguise. He had not quite anticipated this.

A hand appeared from the gloom in front and displayed some papers, which Jimmie studied carefully, wondering as he did so how many wretched people had already sat as he was sitting and seen their most hidden secrets thus produced and the wreck of their whole lives threatened.

The documents were damning enough, he at once saw. There was pasted on a sheet of paper a photograph of a waiter taken at Brighton, obviously Naylor, and beside it was another taken a year ago. Under one the description of a wanted man and details of Naylor's hidden history; under the other a brief narrative cut from a newspaper of Naylor's rise to wealth from unknown beginnings. Pinned to this were further cuttings suggesting that the wanted man had caused the old lady's death by shock, records of the police search for the criminal, and the negative of the earlier photograph. None of it was actually evidence, Jimmie at once saw, but all together it was quite enough to set the police or, worse still, a newspaper investigating. And investigation could have but one result.

"Had he not come into the public eye and had his life not been made so interesting by the newspapers," resumed the voice, "it would have been impossible to have gotten up this little dossier. Also it would not have been profitable. Have you finished looking?"

The hand again reached out and took the papers back.

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Jimmie noted that the nails were well kept and that it seemed to be the hand of a gentleman, but there were on it no rings or other distinguishing marks. Then with a click darkness came down once more.

"H'm!" Jimmie considered. "And the price?"

"Twenty thousand. Before we—er—put our fish back in the river again."

Jimmie whistled. "Quite enough."

"Bah! A flea-bite. He can afford it. And you must admit that if Scotland Yard or the newspapers got those gentle hints it would mean the finish of friend Naylor, from the scandal alone, whether they put him on trial or not. And there's his dear innocent little daughter, too, eh?"

"He'll have to pay, I suppose," said Jimmie, assuming the tone of one who is discouraged, inwardly wondering to himself how he was going to make a start against the gang. So far he had hardly gathered anything that could be called a clue.

"Only the fools refuse to pay."

"It's terrible," murmured Jimmie. Silently his hand felt for his pocket. Here he had cigarettes and a lighter and under pretext of momentary forgetfulness, he hoped to catch a glimpse of the men opposite.

"Well, that's all our business," said the voice in final tones. "You get moving and tell Naylor. He'll hear from us some time to-morrow. And we're watching him, so if he tries any double-crossing or goes to the police, well, he'll only have himself to thank."

"Oh, he won't do that," lied Jimmie, silently placing a cigarette between his lips. "He's far too scared, I fear."

"You don't seem very fond of him?" inquired the voice curiously. "It's a wonder you are working for him like this."

"Well, I have to."

Under cover of the conversation Jimmie by now had the cigarette-lighter out and his thumb was on the catch. Then, eyes straining opposite, he pressed.

The faintest snap sounded before the flame jumped to life; but at that snap, the blackmailer, who must have been on the alert the whole time, at once switched on the light. Rezaire had the barest glimpse of two figures opposite before the light blinded him and a swift blow knocked the lighter from his grasp.

"No tricks, I said," snapped the man, as he switched off the light after it had achieved its purpose. "You can't do that with us. You get out at once."

"Meant to light a cigarette. Force of habit, I'm sorry," murmured Jimmie. And he was sorry. For from the infinitesimal glimpse he had had, he had seen that the face of each man was covered with a mask. They were taking no chances.

As the car slowed up abruptly by the curb Jimmie realized he was indeed up against clever and resourceful opponents. He descended without a word, the Sheffield moving onward almost before his foot had left the running board. Without a second's hesitation he dodged to the back to see the number-plate. But once again he was baffled. For a moment—too short for his mind to take it in and retain it—he had an impression of a number beginning LX . . . then the plate seemed to swivel on an axis and XD7503 was winking mockingly at him in the glow of the rear light, as the blackmailers' car stole rapidly off and round the first corner.

VI

INSTRUCTIONS

JIMMIE was rung up at an early hour next morning by Naylor in a state of great apprehension.

"Well, Mr. Rezaire?" came the curt inquiry down the phone. "What news?"

"I'm afraid," answered Jimmie, "they've got the pull on you. Moreover, anyone who thinks this lot are not in the very first rank is making a great mistake. I can see it from the way they worked last night."

The other swore briefly.

"Did you get any clues?"

"Nothing to speak of. . . . However, I can't tell you anything over the wire. Shall we meet for lunch?"

"All right," agreed Naylor. "Do you know a quiet little place? I never go anywhere but the Granada."

"Quiet little places are no good. Too easy for anybody spying on you."

"Oh, I understand. That reminds me, I have a feeling that this house is being watched."

"Quite likely. They want to see what you are going to do and to make certain you don't go to the police. Look here—your daughter could help in this."

"How?"

"Engage a private room at the Granada for lunch to-day and tell old Whatsisname—Domani—to keep it quiet. Then go to the Granada with your daughter as if taking her out to lunch, leave her to lunch by herself in the restaurant and come up and join me in the private room. That'll put their watchers off, I think."

"Is it wise to go to the Granada?"

"That's safe enough. Besides it's possible they may communicate with you there as before—it's a habit of theirs—in which case, if I'm on the spot, I may get a clue as to how these letters come. They're always delivered by hand, you know. There's one thing about this Black King: he's either too proud or too self-confident apparently to vary his procedure much. Big crooks get like that. So long! Till lunch. . . ."

He replaced the receiver and began to give some very careful instructions to Hyslop.

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Jimmie Rezaire went early to the Granada and asked for a private interview with Signor Domani. He knew him of course by sight and reputation, but the other did not as far as he was aware, know him, for his visits to the Granada were rare.

Signor Domani received him with the urbane condescension due from a great man to one who had apparently neither social standing nor wealth and who was not a regular customer. Jimmie plunged at once into his business.

"A client of yours, a Mr. Naylor, received while here the day before yesterday a very disturbing letter."

The *maitre d'hôtel* inclined his head with the sparse hairs smoothed so neatly over its baldness, and said:

"He mentioned it, Monsieur. I am desolated it should have happened here. The Black King, I understand. I tried to find out who"

"Oh, so you know. Well, it is possible Mr. Naylor may receive another letter to-day."

"He may not be here to-day."

"He has a private room."

"As Monsieur wishes. I was told not to mention it."

"I know about it. I shall be with him. Now, Signor

Domani, I'm a private detective—the police are not in on this—and I want to know if you will give me a little help?"

"But certainly, Monsieur. If in my power." Despite the courteous acquiescence Domani the inimitable managed to convey the impression that he was royalty granting a petition.

"I am having a watcher outside, posted where he can see both your restaurant entrances. Would you be so good as to instruct the commissionaires on duty that they are *at once* to give a signal should either of them be handed a note for Mr. Naylor. Of course, nothing may happen to-day, or the note may be delivered to a waiter inside, but there is a chance, and I don't want to miss it."

"Certainly, Monsieur. As you wish. What signal have you told your watcher to expect?"

"If the commissionaire, at the exact moment he receives the note, will take off his hat and wipe his forehead, my man will understand and will be able to shadow the person. It must be a natural signal or the man may suspect."

"I will see to it with pleasure. It is most annoying, Monsieur, the whole affair."

"I am very grateful indeed to you."

"One moment, Monsieur. How will your man be dressed? If my hall-porters know which he is, they can make quite certain he sees."

"I don't know how he will be dressed," said Jimmie, though he knew perfectly well. But safe though the dignified little Signor Domani was, Rezaire was experienced enough to realize that the fewer the people who knew a plan the better chances that plan had of success.

"But I can rely on him perfectly," he added.

"As Monsieur wishes," said Domani, and sailed out

after Jimmie, his bland face looking as though he had never been told a secret in his life.

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"Hullo, H. H.!" said Betty cheerfully. "I saw you standing there when we went in. So I just bolted some salad and . . . Why, what's up?" she concluded in surprised tones. "Bit huffy, aren't you?"

For Hyslop had not once yet looked at her, even though she was conscious of being quite at her best and in a new frock. Instead he was still staring out past her in the direction of the Granada. Betty followed his gaze and saw a very pretty girl getting out of a taxi and was justifiably, and rather to her own surprise, annoyed.

"When you've seen all you want, suppose you notice me——" she was beginning when Hyslop said hurriedly:

"Don't mind me, old love. Only I've got to keep a sharp lookout for a signal. I'm on duty."

"Heavens!" cried Betty. "I had no idea you were working . . . I mean—I——"

"Don't explain! You'll only make it worse. Yes, I work. Even this gilded lily occasionally does a small toil-and-spin. I suppose you thought I was waiting here on the chance of another charming maiden trying to commit suicide under a taxi."

"Nonsense!" retorted Betty, coloring slightly. She was still young enough to appreciate indirect flattery—especially from this interesting young man. She studied him as he still stared fixedly across the road at the Granada and noticed how the vacuity had completely dropped from his expression. "What a nice boy!" she said to herself. Out loud she merely asked:

"Ought I to go away?"

"Not unless you mind not being looked at. I'd just love to stare at you instead of this darned restaurant, but I mustn't. You'd be much more inspiring, you know."

"What would I inspire you to?" asked Betty mischievously, just to see how he would extricate himself.

She had to admit that he did it very well and left her one down.

"In the spring a young man's fancy . . ." he began loftily, and quickly added, "but of course it's autumn now, isn't it?" Before she could retort he had gone on. "You must excuse me if I go suddenly, won't you? I may have to trail someone. Short sharp yelps of excitement and nose down, you know."

"Of course, I understand. I suppose I *can't* help you, can I?"

"'Fraid not."

"Could I get a taxi and have it waiting for you? You might want one."

"A good idea; thanks, but twenty yards to the left is a small Morris coupé. In it Rezaire's wife is waiting in case a car is necessary."

"Oh!" Betty looked a little angry. She was dying to be of some assistance to him. Then:

"Perhaps I could help later on?"

"Perhaps."

"I should love to come and trail someone with you. I mean," she added hastily, "I've always loved exciting adventures, ever since I was a kid."

Hyslop made no answer and the girl changed the subject.

"You know, father's much more cheerful now you've all taken this business on. He's frightfully keen to get even with them. He . . ."

She suddenly discovered she was talking to an empty

space. Hyslop just was not. He had vanished silently and mysteriously. Betty felt terribly excited—almost as though she had been taking a part in a sensational film.

Then she looked along the street and saw the Morris still there, so that he must have gone on foot. She was unaccountably pleased at this. For a moment she hesitated, wondering whether to go and speak to the girl at the wheel; then tossed her golden head and walked off in the opposite direction. She would have loved that job herself.

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Jimmie and Naylor sat over the remains of a simple meal in the small private room which the latter had engaged on the first floor.

After his first outburst on hearing exactly what the Black King held against him, Naylor had calmed down considerably. Jimmie's self-confident manner had already inspired him with hope.

"I'll pay it," he said, "because I've got Betty to think of. I tried to keep everything from her, but she was too smart and I'm afraid she realizes what's going on, though naturally she doesn't know what it's about. And it'll ruin her life socially if it comes out. But it's all so damned unfair. I've done everything that a man can do to make good my early mistakes." The vengeful look came again into his eyes. "If I don't land them in quod for this—with your help of course—then my name's not . . ."

A knock sounded and Signor Domani entered. He seemed excited, as excited as such a famous person could be.

"This letter has just come," he observed, "for Mr. Naylor."

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"Well?" questioned Jimmie sharply, ignoring both Naylor and the note, and looking at Domani.

"It is all right, Monsieur," answered Domani. "My man did as you asked. Without doubt your watcher will now be on the criminal's heels."

"What's that?" cried Naylor, who had torn the envelope open and then had stopped, realizing the Italian was still in the room.

"Tell you about that later," said Jimmie. "Something good too, I hope it'll be. . . . I'm very grateful indeed, Domani," he continued, and the other retired, his smooth face almost gleaming with pride.

When he had gone and Jimmie had further made certain that no waiter was lurking outside the door, Naylor threw across to him with an angry gesture the closely typewritten sheet he had received.

"I've got to be in the Park next Tuesday and . . ."

"Let me read it please, Mr. Naylor," ordered Jimmie, bending over the fateful sheet of paper.

"Now that your agent has been satisfied that the goods I hold are genuine we will proceed to business. The following instructions as to the payments to me and the delivery of the documents to you must be carefully carried out by you, and you alone. In future I deal with no underlings."

"Got the gift of gab this chap, hasn't he?" murmured Jimmie. "The underling is me."

"Blast his soul!" swore Naylor with feeling.

"On Tuesday next at 10:30 a.m. a saloon car will call at your house. You will instruct the driver to go to your bank, the one in Baker Street, where you will draw £20,000 in £100 notes. The money is to be in ten bundles of £2,000 and attached to each bundle must be a list of

the numbers of the twenty notes contained. You have between now and Tuesday in which to warn your bank and to make full arrangements, so that there may be no delay over this transaction. The money is to be put into an attaché case which you will buy for the purpose. You will then drive into Hyde Park at Marble Arch and continue westward till you are half-way to Lancaster Gate, where you will stop as if looking at the view without getting out of the car. When a dark red car draws up alongside you, you will hand the attaché case to its occupant, and continue to wait. At the end of an hour or so, an envelope will be given to you with what you are purchasing from me inside.

"I may point out that during the whole proceedings you will be under my observation and that should there be any attempt at interference or communication with the police, the bargain will be off and certain interesting facts which invite further study will be put in the hands of both the C.I.D. and the Sunday Press. I may also warn you that you would do well not to entertain any ideas of revenge upon us. We are too powerful and it will be the worse for you.

THE BLACK KING."

Jimmie whistled as he finished. "What a rigmarole!" he said, and added: "But necessary, I suppose. There are damn few loopholes."

"I don't understand this nonsense!" snarled Naylor. "Why Hyde Park? Why the hour's wait? Why the . . ."

"Because's he's safeguarding himself against deception. We might hand over bundles of fake notes, or arrange a surprise arrest as he gave back your papers; or have men ready to trace the notes the moment they came into the banks. That hour's wait cuts those

dangers out. He can see that you've paid correctly; he can change the £100 notes before their numbers can be followed up; and his watcher can make certain there are no detectives hanging round your car or following his. That hour is a very clever and very necessary precaution on his part. In effect, you are isolated and under their eyes while they tidy up all clues. It's the way in which he usually works, though he hasn't chosen that particular place before."

"But what can you do about *this* now?"

Jimmie thought hard for a moment, drumming his fingers on the table.

"I gather," he said at last, "that you are really keen on rounding up this party?"

"As long as my secret is kept, yes, I certainly am."

"Well, say good-bye to your money to start with. For the only way by which we can get on the track of these very elusive birds is to carry out their instructions. Are you prepared for that?"

Naylor scowled. "As long as you can get them without their letting my secret out, I don't give a damn! But how will you get a chance? By the time I've got what I want and am safe the whole show is over, and any pursuit will annoy them and will be fruitless as well."

"Ah, that's just the point," remarked Rezaire thoughtfully. "Will it? Police pursuit, yes. Because things get around sometimes from Scotland Yard—and because a 'busy' disguised is always a disguised 'busy.' But my arrangements will be different."

"How the devil can you do it without them finding out? You mustn't risk a failure."

Jimmie remained silent again for a while. Then he said:

"I haven't worked everything out yet, but I see just

one weak point in our friend's plan due to the new place he has chosen. He has carefully isolated you between Lancaster Gate and Marble Arch, *but* he has, so to speak, isolated himself as well."

"How?"

"Listen! From that point he, being in the Park in a car himself, and not on foot, can only go two ways, east to Marble Arch, or west to Lancaster Gate, before he gets a further choice of roads. *But* by the time his car reaches either of those two points it will be out of sight of the accomplice who is watching you, and can therefore be picked up more or less with impunity by watchers of mine. He won't suspect pursuit by then, and we'll have his trail—the first who have ever done so."

Naylor's face brightened then fell. "All very fine," he said, "but that cuts both ways. Your friends won't know what car to follow. Because being out of sight they won't see what car stops by me."

"I intend to have a man at the central trysting place myself. He will see everything."

"But I still don't see how you will pass the news."

"To be candid, I'm not quite certain myself yet," smiled Jimmie. "Don't rush me. I shall get out a plan to tail up these beauties without their knowing, and on those lines too; it's the only opening he's given us. What you have to do, Mr. Naylor, is to carry out these instructions implicitly."

"Very well, if you think it best. They've got a nerve," he broke off, "delivering notes by hand. Who did that, I wonder?"

"Ah," said Jimmie, "I might be able to tell you that quite soon. With any luck. I'm expecting a report about it this afternoon."

Naylor looked at him again, and this time Jimmie was

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pleased to note there was a certain admiration in his usually hard gaze.

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The report which Jimmie was expecting was not at all the kind he had hoped. At about four o'clock Hyslop let himself into No. 15 Flat in Somerset Mansions, and when the door was shut greeted Jimmie and Viv in dejected fashion.

"There's some funny business somewhere, old laddie," he began. "I can't make it out."

"Did you lose the trail? Viv came back when she saw you didn't need a car. She said you picked up the fellow who was tipped to you."

"Yes, when the porter signalled, I"

"She also said," continued Jimmie drily, "that you picked up someone else."

"Oh, the Naylor girl," remarked Hyslop very airily. "Yes, she came out and chatted. I couldn't send her away very well."

"Viv said she noticed you trying *so* hard."

"You be careful, H. H.," put in Viv, "or that kid will be getting fond of you. I know the signs."

"On seeing the porter's signal," resumed Hyslop, in a very aloof manner, "I followed the bird indicated—though personally I didn't see him hand any letter. It was about two P. M. and he was coming out of the restaurant by the Piccadilly entrance at the time, so I followed him along Piccadilly and down Haymarket and along the Strand, where he went into a Shipping Agency. And then out and finally back to his home."

"His home? Then who is he?"

"He's Sir Blenheim Watkyns, the explorer."

"Watkyns! Are you certain?"

"Positive!"

"Viv! Hand over that 'Who's Who.' . . . But he's only just back from South America, so the papers say."

"I know. I talked with a maid."

"Pretty one, I hope, H. H.?" said Viv. "It seems to be your day."

"Face like the back of a house," returned Hyslop briefly.

Jimmie was looking through the book his wife handed him. "He's a very well-known man apparently; he must be perfectly innocent of anything like blackmailing," he announced at last, in a puzzled tone.

"Did you find out, H. H.," asked Viv, "where he got the note from and why he gave it to the hall-porter?"

"No. I felt so baffled by the whole business, dear old thing, I simply came home. Here's his address, if you want to tail him further."

"It's impossible," said Jimmie at last. "You've got the wrong man."

"There was no doubt about the signal," retorted Hyslop very positively.

"Damned odd!" Jimmie paused for a moment then reached for the phone. In a minute he was speaking to Signor Domani himself, who listened with great sympathy and promised to make inquiries.

"I think Domani's Italian heart is rather pleased at being in all this," remarked Jimmie, as he hung up again. "As long as it doesn't do his place any harm."

Ten minutes later Domani was ringing up. His voice was now the voice of an angry man.

"Monsieur Rezaire," he said, "I am unable to say how sorry I am. But it appears that the note was handed in at our side-entrance by the same man as before, a man in black, and my commissioner gave the agreed sign. Sir Blenheim Watkyns, whom I know well,

had lunched here and left by the Piccadilly entrance some short while previously. He spoke to the commissionaire there whom he knows, and as far as I can ascertain, just about that time the fool of a man, feeling the heat, took off his hat and wiped his forehead unwittingly. The sign, you see, was such a natural one that . . .”

Jimmie swore roundly, and after thanking Signor Domani for his trouble, rang off.

For a while he was silent, angrily tracing lines on his blotting paper, while Viv and Hyslop conversed in low tones. Suddenly he laughed out loud. “I suppose it’s my fault for not arranging a better signal,” he said. “But it’s dashed hard luck.”

“You’d better have the old porter Johnnie stand on his head next time,” suggested Hyslop. “I don’t suppose he’d be likely to do *that* if he felt the heat, would he?”

Jimmie only snorted, and Hyslop continued:

“Reverting, old horse, to the topic of Betty Naylor, a topic which seems to intrigue you both immoderately, that girl’s as keen as mustard about helping us.”

“Us or you, H. H.?” put in Viv.

“Do you think we could use her in any way, Jimmie?”

Jimmie shook his head. “’Fraid not. The only way in which she can be a help,” he said frankly, “is by keeping out of it. You see, she’s really a source of weakness.” He observed Hyslop’s expression and added more kindly: “If you want to see more of her, H. H., take her out to lunch and dinner or what you like when you have time—but don’t make a habit of pleasant little watching parties *à deux*. You’ve only got to read crime stories to see that without the heroine the detective would generally finish the job in Chapter V. See what I mean?”

"Right ho, papa!"

"By being with you to-day it's quite possible she's put the Black King onto the fact that we're handling Naylor's case . . ." He broke off as the telephone once more rang shrilly.

"Hullo!"

"Is that Mr. Rezaire?"

"Yes. Who is it?"

"A message for you."

"Fire away!"

"The Black King's advice to you and your crowd is to get out of this game and keep out of it. You won't do any good, and you may hurt yourself. Good-bye."

"What?" gasped Jimmie. "This is . . . Here, Exchange! Exchange! Quick, I've been cut off. I want the number of . . ."

"Did you meyke the caaall?" A superior female voice interrupted him.

"No. But I want their number. I . . ."

"If you hang up they'll call you agaaain."

"They darn well won't!" Jimmie cursed the operator's stereotyped phrases. "Please get me the number quick. It's exceedingly serious."

There was a pause, while Jimmie's heart beat fast. Then:

"Sorrreh, but it was a public call box."

VII

GATHERING CLUES

TUESDAY morning came, and Mr. Naylor, waiting sullenly at his home, was informed by his butler at ten-thirty that a car had called for him.

"What car's that?" asked Betty quickly, when the butler had gone. "Where are you going?"

"Just out for a spin," replied her father evasively.

She detected the evasion, guessed that he was going to meet the blackmailer. She grew a little frightened.

"Are you quite sure you'll be safe?"

Naylor kissed her. "Bless you, yes. I know exactly what's going to happen."

But Betty perceived what this meant. She caught him by the coat lapels. "Father, you're not going to pay this—this Black King? . . . Oh, you're *not*. And I thought when you got Rezaire in you were going to fight them."

"Darling child, I can't. At least not yet. Because, although you don't understand, your happiness depends on my paying."

"Damn my happiness! Fight them. Don't be done."

He patted her on the shoulder. She had the right spirit. "Listen, my dear! I'm *going* to fight them—with Rezaire's help, but I must draw their teeth first. At any rate those teeth that would hurt your future. Then I promise you I'm going to go after them as long as I have a penny left. Does that satisfy you?"

"I suppose so."

"And I've got the right man to help me," he added, as he went to the door.

"Oh, you have," replied Betty, so enthusiastically that Naylor wondered how on earth she could have been so impressed by Rezaire in such a short time.

In the hall he kissed her again and went down the steps.

"Mr. Naylor?" asked the driver of the car, who did not look as though he had any connection with a gang of blackmailers.

"Yes, that's me."

"The car you ordered from the Daimler Hire Service, sir."

"Oh, ah, yes," said the financier, realizing that the Black King, to avoid giving even the slightest clue, had apparently ordered a well-known firm to send a car for him.

He went to his Baker Street Bank and drew the money, for the payment of which in ten packets of twenty notes each he had previously arranged. He also secured copies of the numbers of the notes, in case he wanted them. But these he knew from Jimmie would be useless as clues. The clerk made but little comment; eccentricity in money matters was very common; indeed not a week ago he had had an old lady in, who had withdrawn her whole credit, counted it to see that it was all there and handed it back again.

A short while later Naylor was waiting at the spot indicated in the Park midway between Lancaster Gate and Marble Arch. Here, under pretext of admiring the autumn tints, as ordered, he looked about him to see if he could by any chance discern the Black King's watchers.

After a few minutes he felt he had placed three, even though the Park on a fine September morning is not an unusual spot for strangers to lounge and do nothing. First, leaning on the railings some yards in front and

apparently watching the occasional riders, there was a little man in a check suit and cap, like an ex-jockey. Next, somewhere to the rear of the car a suspicious looking fellow in cycling knickerbockers and a sweater propped himself against his machine and conversed with a girl. And even as Naylor marked these three an old woman with a red wrinkled face, large glasses and wispy grey hair under a black bonnet tottered along carrying a small black bag and sat down on a bench just across the road. Was she too watching him, wondered Naylor? If so she was playing her part well; for a moment afterwards, when a tramp arrived and occupied the rest of the bench by putting up his feet and going to sleep, she very nearly got up in obvious disgust and moved away again.

As he looked round, for a moment Naylor experienced a queer feeling of excitement at the pit of his stomach. Here he was in the very middle of things. He was going to lose £20,000, but he was taking steps to get even. He wondered which, if any, of these three men—or even the woman—was Jimmie Rezaire's watcher, the one who was to be there also. Or perhaps Rezaire's man was stationed at the window of one of the houses opposite. He was trusting Rezaire a lot, he suddenly realized, and he did not believe in trusting people. Rezaire had not looked very straight, but still one could never really tell by appearances. He must chance it.

He squared his shoulders and looked about him. The jockey had now crossed the road in order to walk carelessly past the bench, whereon sat the tramp and the old woman, bag on knees, and now poring over a book. Naylor felt certain those three were accomplices, perhaps interchanging a message, and at that instant a wave of indignation passed over him. He ceased to bother at all about the impending loss of the money at

his side, so long as by so doing he could drag these criminals into the light. At any rate he was the first of their victims to make any attempt to bring them to book. But he hoped desperately that Rezaire would make no slip which would intimate to the blackmailers before he received his precious papers that they were being watched after all. Not only would he then lose all chance of running them to earth, but social ruin for himself and his daughter would at once be his fate.

Suddenly he was aware that a car had driven up silently beside his. A closed car, dark red. Was this then the Black King? He could not see inside. A hand reached out and beckoned impatiently, and with a little sigh Naylor passed over the attaché case packed with £100 notes, feeling, as he did so, that he must be an imbecile.

Next minute the car was off towards Lancaster Gate. Naylor just had time to note the number. It was XD7503. Then he settled down to wait according to his instructions. The jockey, he observed, was back again at the railings watching the riders. The old woman by the sleeping tramp was still nodding and ducking her head over the book supported on her little black bag. Behind his car the cyclist still remained, though his female companion had now gone. Naylor bit his fingers and at intervals a dull flush of revengeful fury spread over his fierce-lined face.

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The minutes ran past till nearly an hour had elapsed and still Naylor waited in his car. He had paid away £20,000 on the most unfair and outrageous demand possible, or so it seemed to a man who considered he had made full and just restitution for earlier misdeeds; yet he had not yet received his precious *quid pro quo*; in fact

he was hating the whole affair. He hoped to the devil Rezaire was doing something to earn his money and to achieve an ultimate revenge on these scoundrels. He looked again upon all the nonchalant watchers round him—jockey, cyclist, old woman, tramp, and felt like a fly in a web. Then he cursed vehemently to himself and let his thoughts linger upon vengeance. Naylor, when stirred by a sense of injustice, was a vindictive man.

His musing was abruptly shattered. A green saloon car had whizzed past him and was gone before he could see either its number or who had so skilfully thrown the packet into his car. He stooped for it with a cry and at last had in front of him all the damning evidence of his earlier criminal life, just as Rezaire had described it. He sighed with relief—thank Heaven they had played straight and had not realized that he had got Rezaire watching them. And now he was a free man—free to work for his revenge. He thrust the packet into his coat and then solemnly stood up and shook his fist at each of the four watchers in turn. The jockey grinned at him but the others took no notice. He sat down again and curtly told the chauffeur, now evidently under the impression his passenger was mad, to drive him home to Portman Square.

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Mr. Naylor would have been surprised had he been able to see the little drama that was played out among the four watchers in the Park, when finally his car had driven off. None of them moved for some while, and then the cyclist wheeled his bike along to where the jockey still leaned on the railings and borrowed a match. After this the jockey walked across to the bench opposite and stood, hands in pockets, facing the sleeping tramp and the old woman who, with a hand clutched convul-

sively over her black bag, was still deep in her book. He grinned at the pair and then said in a derisive but cultured voice:

“Well, you two, have you seen all you wanted?”

The tramp did not stir. The old woman looked up, peered vaguely about through her glasses and then said “Eh?” putting her hand to her ear.

“Nice little show, wasn’t it? Did you watch my sleeves and see where the rabbit went?”

“Eh?” repeated the old woman leaning forward, while the tramp sat up and blinked.

“Generally speaking,” went on the other, “we don’t like spectators, but we decided there wasn’t any harm in you two having seats for the performance, because you’re interested parties. But, you see, you didn’t learn anything, you couldn’t communicate with friends because we’ve been watching, and anyway the curtain’s down now and the show’s over.”

“Shall I slug him for yer?” asked the tramp suddenly hopeful, but the old woman shook her head, and made a sign for him to go. Which he did, though not without a lingering look at the man who was dressed like a jockey and spoke like a gentleman.

When he had slouched off, the little old woman slowly got to her feet. She faced the other and making a dignified little bob said in a quavering voice:

“Most instructive, sir, I congratulate you. And of course I admit myself defeated.”

“Well, you can go back and tell your inquisitive Mr. Rezaire that,” jeered the other.

“I will,” answered Jimmie Rezaire, with a little smile, and ambled slowly off, carrying the little black bag. He carried it exceedingly carefully, for it contained a very compact, very expensive miniature wireless transmitting set. The sending key was made in the form of the lock

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on the outside of the bag and had been under Jimmie's hand for the last hour.

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At Lancaster Gate a motor-cycle and sidecar stood by the curb. The passenger, muffled to the eyes, sat stolidly in his seat, while the driver, who wore a leather helmet with protecting ear pieces, bent over his machine apparently engaged in adjusting some fault.

That it was not a bad fault was obvious when a moment later he abruptly left what he was doing and appeared to listen intently, signing to his companion not to speak. Then he straightened himself and swung quickly into the saddle.

"They've chosen to come our way, Joe, old son," he said, and the voice was young Hyslop's. "Are you all set and so forth?"

"Trust me, sir," came from Joe Plumer in muffled tones. "Wot number?"

"XD7503. The one they had the other night. Dark red closed Sheffield car. Young clean-shaven chauffeur in brown kit. . . . That was all the information. Now it's up to us." As he spoke he removed his leather helmet, inside which was concealed a pair of earphones connected with a portable receiving set in the sidecar. Joe stowed the apparatus away while his companion assumed a cloth cap and goggles.

"There she goes," Hyslop added in low tones, kicking his engine to a roar, as a dark red car with XD7503 on its number-plate swept past them and stopped some yards ahead opposite the Lancaster Gate exit. "They're waiting to see no one's coming after them from the Park," he guessed, catching sight of an eye at the back window. "Well, they won't suspect us, because we're here already."

In a moment the red car, evidently satisfied that no pursuit was to be anticipated, moved onward. It did not, however, leave the Park, but turned southward towards the bridge over the Serpentine and York Gate. Hyslop, Joe Plumer at his side, gave them a moment and then followed.

They kept their quarry easily in sight down into Knightsbridge, across Hyde Park Corner and into Piccadilly. Here the car stopped at the United London Bank and a girl got out. She was a petite blonde, fashionably dressed. She wore a green hat and carried an attaché case. At the corner of the building she spoke to a man in commissionaire's uniform with sergeant's stripes, who was standing aimlessly about, as if expecting her. Together then they entered the bank.

In five minutes the girl was out again and this time the commissionaire, who, carrying the attaché case and some canvas bags, entered the car with her.

Hyslop whistled as they drove on. "That's cute," he admitted.

"Meaning, he's a wrong 'un?" asked Joe.

"Without doubt. A good disguise that uniform for doing a bank job."

"Wish I'd thought of it, when I was in the business," muttered Joe, the ex-burglar, morosely. "Look out, sir, they're stopping again," he added, as the car drew up at another bank a little further down Piccadilly.

In all the dark red Sheffield visited ten banks all down Piccadilly and St. James Street. At each the procedure was the same. The girl and her accomplice, dressed in a commissionaire's uniform, entered the building with the attaché case, were inside for a few minutes, and returned with a few canvas bags, till the car must have contained two or three dozen of them.

"What's *in* them bags?" asked Joe at one point.

"Money, you fool! Probably pound notes—which can't be traced. May be fivers if they think they can get rid of 'em quick!"

Joe sat straight up in amazement, and his little eyes rolled. "Gor lumme!" he exclaimed at last. Then, recovering: "'Ere, don't let's lose the pair whatever we do!"

"I'm afraid they may separate," said Hyslop anxiously—and found that at the last bank his fear was well founded.

It all happened in a moment of time. Instead of getting in the car again, the girl abruptly turned off down a side street, while the pseudo-commissionaire, after touching his hat to her as if he had received a tip, nodded to the chauffeur and crossed the road. Then, quick as a flash, the car shot over the crossing at the foot of St. James' Street, just before the policeman held up the traffic, and was out of sight down Pall Mall, leaving Hyslop's sidecar caught helplessly in the block behind the white-gloved hand.

"Blimey, we've lost the cash!" swore Joe, but Hyslop cut in with:

"Don't talk! Never mind the car, you get out and follow the man. Find out what you can. I'll tail the girl."

The stolid Joe had hardly bundled out of the sidecar before Hyslop had turned round and was off down the side-street. He would have a difficult job, he realized, following the girl while she was on foot, and he hoped she would soon take a taxi or even a bus.

In about ten minutes his troubles began. He had followed fairly discreetly the small figure in the green hat stepping daintily along ahead, till she reached Piccadilly Circus. At this point she disappeared unexpectedly down a subway leading to the vast subter-

ranean lighted cavern, shop-lined and crowded, which enfolds the Underground's booking-offices.

Hyslop swore. She might be going by tube; or she might be only making a safe crossing of the traffic-infested Circus, to reappear at any one of the other four exits from that big circular booking-hall. Whatever she did he could not run the risk of losing her, and so he swung off his bike, leaving it where it was and made for the same entrance. A shout from a policeman stopped him as he reached it, and two valuable minutes were wasted while he was reprimanded for leaving his sidecar in a busy street. By the time he had parked it up a side turning he realized that search in that swarming hive under Piccadilly Circus was quite hopeless. He was forced to return to Somerset Mansions none too pleased with his work. His one consolation was that Joe Plumer might have had better luck with the commissionaire.

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Viv, dressed as a boy in riding breeches, a thick coat, and a leather helmet like Hyslop's, sat astride a solo motor-cycle in a side-street off the Bayswater Road. Her duty it had originally been to guard the Marble Arch outlet of the road through Hyde Park in which the Black King's car had so unwittingly but conveniently isolated itself, and she too had been in touch with Jimmie Rezaire, on the actual scene of operation, by the same method as Hyslop and Joe Plumer had been. In her own concealed earphones she had heard in rapid Morse the first quick instructions from her partner—the number and description of the car and that it had elected to go off by the Lancaster Gate exit. A few minutes after she had, following out a plan already arranged between her and Jimmie, moved to this side-

street, carefully selected because it was equidistant from both Lancaster Gate and Marble Arch. Her part it was now to pick up if possible and follow the car that returned to Naylor his incriminating documents, as soon as she received its description and direction.

She had been waiting for nearly an hour and nothing had happened, except a short cheery message from Jimmie saying that Naylor was "still sitting in the car and looking pretty sick." Then suddenly, as she mused, there came the sharp buzzing in her earphones for which she had waited, and she was at once alert.

"A green Manchester ME12 ——" she could not catch the exact number—"Going west. Quick!"

Viv did not waste an instant. She had to get to Lancaster Gate and pick up this car and Jimmie's last word showed there was urgency. Her carefully-primed engine leaped to life and she was off.

It was a near thing. Only taxis and a yellow coupé were actually at Lancaster Gate when she arrived, but far down the slope of the Bayswater Road leading to Notting Hill Gate she saw a green car and took a chance. A minute later she sighed with relief, as the number ME1214 stared at her from its number-plate. Two men were inside, but what they were like she could not see. Then she slowed back a little and set herself to follow.

She soon satisfied herself that the men in the Manchester were not aware of pursuit; but evidently they were taking no chances, for she had the utmost difficulty in following their many twistings and turnings. Up Queen's Road, into the squalid side-streets of far North Kensington and thence the worse ones of Paddington she followed skilfully. Once only did she lose sight of her quarry and that was from sheer anxiety to keep them unsuspecting. But her machine had the advantage

of mobility in the traffic and she had soon picked them up again in the next block. At last they turned definitely south and sliding noiselessly down via Edgware Road and Oxford Street, they came at about half-past twelve to Piccadilly. Here abruptly the car stopped and a man with a pale face, neatly dressed in a grey suit, and wearing rimless glasses, got out.

Viv had to make a quick decision as the car at once moved onward. Should she continue after the car, or take the man? She decided on the car, and realized she had done well, for as she moved forward she saw from the corner of her eye that the man had turned into the ultra-fashionable Granada Restaurant. Dressed as she was she could never have followed her man to lunch at the Granada without making herself conspicuous.

The green Manchester now went straight on south at a great speed, and Viv followed till half an hour or so later they were on the Dorking road. At this point to her unutterable disgust her carburetor jet developed a stoppage and her quarry sailed on ahead. By the time she had put the matter right she doubted very much whether she could catch it up again. She went on, however, as far as the next turning and then gave a little cry of delight. For it was a cross roads with an Automobile Association telephone box and by it, by a vast stroke of good luck, there stood a stolid A. A. scout taking numbers of passing cars for an hour or so to include in his report.

"Excuse me," began the girl breathlessly, "which way did a car with ME1214 go?"

The man consulted his book. "Ain't passed *me*," he said at last.

"Surely it has. Are you *certain*?"

"I've got every number ever since half-past twelve—'cept one motor-bike."

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"It was a green closed Manchester. Surely you must have seen it? It's rather an important matter for me."

The A. A. man scratched his chin. "When I'm taking numbers I don't notice the cars much," he confessed. "Besides, there've bin a lot lately. There was two green Manchesters passed a short while ago."

"Two?" The girl's voice expressed her dismay.

"Two that I *remember* noticing, that is," added the man unhelpfully.

"Wasn't *one* of them ME1214?"

"No." He looked at his book again. "One was OR1427, and the other, I think, HB7126. And, mark you, I'm not certain there wasn't more Manchesters before these two. Green Manchesters is common. But no ME1214, I'll swear."

"Thank you," said Viv wearily, forced to accept defeat. Either the man had made a mistake, and in face of his note-book this seemed unlikely; or else the Manchester appeared to have vanished into thin air.

Then suddenly her face brightened. She remembered what Jimmie had told her, about how the car belonging to the Black King in which he had sat some nights ago as Naylor's emissary, had a movable number-plate, worked by a lever inside. The solution of the mystery leaped to her mind. That was what had happened here to yet another car belonging to the arch-blackmailer. ME1214 was a fake number, just as—what was it?—XD7503 had been, and had, unluckily for her, been changed during the time she had been forced to halt. One of these two was therefore the one she was after.

"Which way did they go?" she asked quickly.

"One went straight on, the other to the left."

"I'm afraid that does not help. Do you remember whether one of them had only one man?"

But the scout could not recall this. "You see," he

repeated, "when I'm making a record like this for an hour or so, I really only look at the numbers. Some of 'em go so fast."

"No hope there either," thought Viv. She had now no means of ascertaining which car was the one she wanted. And after this delay it was too late to pursue one of them on the even chance. There would be other choices of direction long before she could catch up. She was beaten. Except that she now knew that the real number of the Black King's green Manchester car was one of those two given her. She made a note of both of them—OR1427 and HB7126—gave the man half-a-crown and was turning back somewhat disconsolately when she recollected the gentleman in the grey suit who had gone to lunch at the Granada. Something certainly ought to be done about him. He was her last hope now that the car itself had eluded her.

In a few moments she was telephoning from the A. A. box and to her delight Hyslop's voice answered her from Somerset Mansions.

"Any luck, H. H.?" she asked.

"Yes and no, old thing. I mean, *I* didn't have any, but Plumer is on a good line, I hope. Jimmie's just back, by the way, changing out of his stays. What luck did you have?"

"Tell you later. In the meantime, look here, this is urgent. If you go at once to the Granada you may catch a man lunching there." She described him as definitely as she could. "He's a fellow who got out of the car which I had to follow—and which unfortunately I've just lost—and he must be one of the gang."

"Right ho, Viv, old lady, I'll be right there. So long."

Viv rang off and rode back to town to report in person to Jimmie.

VIII

FOLLOWING UP MR. VALLANCE

“**H**ULLO! What’s this? Annual General Meeting of Rezaire’s Limited!” commented Hyslop with a laugh, entering the drawing-room at tea time. “What are we all doing now?”

“Profit and Loss Account,” said Jimmie grimly. “After this morning’s adventures. But there seems to be more loss than profit, I’m afraid. For you, of all people, not to be able to follow a girl in Piccadilly! . . .”

“Tut! Tut! Joke in bad taste, laddie.”

“Well, get your tea, sit down and spill the latest.”

Hyslop sank into a chair, put his feet up on another, caught Viv’s eye and took them hurriedly off again.

“After wandering up and down between the tables at the Granada like a lost soul,” he began, “with ten waiters on my tail offering me tables, I picked that fellow up. He’d nearly finished his lunch, so I didn’t get much myself. Elderly, pasty-faced, rimless glasses, natty grey suiting . . .”

“That’s the bird,” said Viv.

“Well, luckily for us he’s a fairly well-known customer, and so I was able to find out something about him from the cloak-room attendant. Apparently at intervals of about a month or so he comes up to town for five or six days from the depths of the country.”

“Where?”

“Couldn’t find out. But when up in town for his monthly binge he takes nearly all his meals at the Granada, is reputed to have business in the City, and

stays at Wellingford Private Hotel in Bayswater. And his name is Vallance. That's all. Cost me a quid, all that — Er, do I get it back from you—or does Naylor cough it up?"

Jimmie, however, was serious. "The only person now left to report is Joe."

"Well, he may have got something more hopeful than any of us."

"There he is now," said Viv, listening to a door in the hall. "Joe!" she called.

Joe's downcast face told his story of failure as he entered the room.

"I've bin done proper, guv'nor," he began straight away. "By that bloke in uniform what Mr. 'Islop told me to tail up."

"Did he shake you?"

"Shake me! Not me, he didn't. I followed 'im all right."

"Where did he go then?" came from three throats.

"'Ome!" said Joe simply.

"Home?"

"Yus. Right up Tottenham way too, blast 'im!"

"Who is he?"

"Just what 'e looks," explained Joe disgustedly. "He is a blooming commissionaire, has been for years. On his way back he went into an office off the Strand for five minutes called 'Headquarters of Corpse of Commissionaires,' or something like that, and I asked another bloke about 'im and he's quite well known there. Sergeant Balligan his name is."

"H'm," said Jimmie. "Did you speak to him himself?"

"No, but later on I 'eard him, speaking to a pal on a tram, when, mark you, he didn't know I was listening, and he was talking about his job that morning. The

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queerest he'd ever had, he said. Had to meet a lady outside a bank and then go with her in a car to about a dozen others, slowly filling up the car with the money what she got. *I seen 'im doing it. And she gave him five pounds at the end.* A pathetic look came into Joe Plumer's eyes. "'E seemed *pleased* about it, too! Give 'im a fiver—and he'd been humping *fousands! Pleased!* 'E must be 'arf-baked!"

Jimmie, who had been jotting down a note or two, now suddenly interrupted and dismissed his servant with a word of thanks.

"So much for that clue!" he said, when the door had closed behind Plumer's disconsolate figure. "Clever devils, aren't they?"

"Then you believe that man was O. K.?"

"Why not? You can hire commissionaires if you want to, and what more natural for a nervous young lady who desired the help and protection of a reliable man because she had to handle large sums of cash. However, I'll verify it to-morrow."

"They don't leave any clues, do they?" said Hyslop at last.

"They don't," returned Jimmie. "That's been brought home to me pretty thoroughly this afternoon."

"And what have *you* done this afternoon, laddie?"

"First I rang up the Daimler Hire Service, and learned that Naylor's car had been ordered by phone yesterday. The bill"—he smiled faintly—"was, I learned, to be sent to No. 15 Somerset Mansions . . ."

"Thank God," grinned Hyslop, "one of 'em's got a sense of humor. . . ."

"To a Mr. H. Hyslop," continued Jimmie imper-
turbably.

"Here, I say, that's no damn joke," cried H. H., the grin fading abruptly.

"Then I visited two or three of these banks to make inquiries. Got the same story everywhere. A young lady had made previous arrangements to change about 20 £100 notes into ones. Notes genuine. Everything all in order. So you see, before Naylor had ever got his precious little packet back, all the notes he had given—which of course are traceable,—were back again in the possession of the banking fraternity."

"And anyone who tried to trace them would have simply come round in a circle," supplied Viv.

"Exactly."

"They *are* a slick lot," repeated Hyslop.

"Yes. But all the same they didn't spot grannie's little black bag," said Jimmie triumphantly. "They guessed I was one of my own watchers, and of course they also got on to Betters, who was with me to prevent anyone else sitting on my bench. As far as *they* know, we haven't got a single clue."

"But we know the Vallance laddie is one of them."

"That," said Jimmie, "is the only useful bit of information we've got out of all our day's work. We must concentrate on friend Vallance. Wellingford Hotel, Bayswater, you said, didn't you?" He reached out a hand for the telephone.

"All right, old son. I've verified everything and chatted about him to the Manageress. Apparently Vallance is considered a queer old bird. Out on business all day. Meals at the Granada, and very often walks home from there at night across the Park . . ."

"Does he?" said Jimmie, suddenly alert, and then relapsed into deep thought, his bright restless eyes half closed.

"Shall I go and vamp him one evening and get him run in?" asked Viv.

"No. I've thought of something better than that.

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Assuming he's one of the principal members of this gang—and everything points to that, for he it was who gave the packet back to Naylor—then we've got two courses open to us. One is to shadow his every movement day and night . . .”

“It won't take him long to get onto that.”

“Agreed. And then he'll know at once we've spotted him as one of the gang—which is our only advantage at the moment. No, we must use him in a better way than that. After all if we want to do anything to round up these fellows and earn Naylor's money, we've got to take a bold stroke.”

“Such as?”

“I'm going to hold this man up when he's crossing the Park at night. It's a hundred to one he'll have something interesting in his pockets.”

“But, my dear old soul! He'll call in the police. We've got nothing against him so far, and we'll simply find ourselves working out the rest of our plans behind bars.”

“Not if it's done my way,” smiled Jimmie, and Hyslop was silent. He had worked long enough with Jimmie to trust the other's quick resourceful brain and clever unexpected methods to the very utmost.

A moment later Jimmie added: “Can that young lady of yours act, H. H.?”

“What young lady, old son?”

“Come off it!”

“I suppose you mean Betty.”

“Miss Naylor,” amended Viv.

“Have it your own way,” said Hyslop. “Thank God little H. H. doesn't mind being ragged. . . . She told me she used to play a lot in private theatricals— Why?”

“Well, I rather think we can delight her little heart

by letting her help put it across Vallance. It's ten to one he doesn't know her by sight—anyway she can make up."

"But I thought you were against having her around?"

"Not if she can help. And the more we have in my little plan the better the chance of success."

"She'll love it," cried Hyslop.

"And I bet you'll love the part I'm going to give her," smiled Jimmie, very pleased with a little joke of his own. "She's to be your sweetheart."

"Here, I say," cried H. H., his fair face going quite pink.

"I'll say she'll love it," said Viv. "What am I to be, Jimmie?"

"You! You're to be a Lady of the Night," replied her husband ungallantly.

Mr. Vallance was kept unobtrusively in view for the next three or four evenings before the opportunity for which Jimmie had been waiting occurred. On two nights he took a taxi back to Bayswater; once he was accompanied by a friend; and once Hyslop, who was watching him, missed him altogether. But on the very next night, chance, as if to make up for its previous tantalizing behavior, arranged everything perfectly.

At ten-thirty, a little later than usual, Mr. Vallance entered Hyde Park to walk across to his Bayswater Hotel. So skilfully had Hyslop done his watching during the past four days, that Mr. Vallance had long ago been lulled into a sense of complete security in the belief that his activities were quite unknown and unsuspected, and that the Rezaire gang had been so baffled by the previous Thursday's events in the Park that they had retired from the game. He and his friends always prided themselves on leaving no clues,

and had no reason to think that they had done so on this occasion. Moreover, his mind was fully engaged with some instructions which had resulted from a secret and important interview he had had during the day, so that not at any point did he observe the unkempt young man who had picked him up so unobtrusively outside the Granada and had followed him ever since.

At the Park entrance his silent shadow noted which path he chose and then overtook and passed him, walking rapidly and breaking into a run when out of sight.

Some ten minutes later in a dark and momentarily deserted part of the Park Mr. Vallance was roused out of his meditation by the violent quarrelling of a young man and a girl who were approaching him along the same path. They drew near, still arguing hotly, and so engrossed were they in what was evidently a lover's squabble, that he was forced to stand aside to let them go past.

He did not know exactly how it happened, but all at once he had received a sharp and unprovoked blow in the solar plexus from the young man. As he dropped gasping to the ground he felt quick hands stealing into his breast pocket. Badly winded for the moment, he could only clutch unavailingly at the thieving fingers, till he got his breath. Then:

"Help!" he managed to gasp, scrambling to his feet. "Help!" he got out again and louder, clutching his assailant's arm to prevent his escape. "Police!" he cried as he saw someone coming up.

"I'll teach you to interfere," said the young man, very surprisingly, and, "Serve you right, Nosey Parker!" added the girl.

Mr. Vallance was astounded by this for a moment. "Interfere. What do you mean, my man?" he began; then feeling his pockets he suddenly realized that an

important wallet had gone. "Give me back what you've stolen!" he snarled murderously.

"I ain't stolen nothing," retorted the young man, still making no effort to run away.

A little elderly man in a bowler hat had just arrived on the scene. "There's a bobby there, mister!" he said, eagerly officious, pulling at Vallance's sleeve.

Vallance looked round and catching sight of a stolid uniformed figure, again cried "Help! Here! Police!"

Another man and a girl had already approached curiously at his shouts. Behind them at last appeared the constable, coming up as quickly as his dignity would let him. Mr. Vallance grasped his prisoner tighter.

"What's all this?" began the constable.

"I've been assaulted and robbed."

"You blinking liar!" snapped the young man. "I ain't touched nothing."

"My wallet has gone from my pocket. You took it."

"Gawd forgive you!" put in the girl in awed tones.

"He knocked me down, constable, and then took it while I was temporarily helpless."

"*Did* you hit 'im?" asked the policeman severely. "Anyway what's it all about?"

"I did hit him," admitted the young man, but continued surprisingly, "but only after he hit me." He pointed to a bruise on his face. Mr. Vallance had not noticed it before, and knowing he had never touched the fellow, he suddenly began to feel that there might be more in this than a mere common attempt at robbery.

"Yes, that's right," corroborated the girl breathlessly. "He interfered between us."

"My young lady and me was having words," explained the young man with some dignity.

"We wasn't 'arf neither," supplemented the girl.

"And then this bloke steps in and tells me to stop it,

and I says, 'She's *my* girl!' and then he hits me and so I hits him back."

The policeman nodded slightly. This was an old story.

"I never hit you, and you know it," returned Mr. Vallance, more calmly. He was now gazing very intently at the two opposite. There was no doubt now in his mind that something very funny was on. "This is a put-up job," he accused.

"Did *you* hit *him*?" now asked the constable of Mr. Vallance.

"You've heard my denial," said Vallance coldly. "Why should I hit him? It's a simple case of robbery."

"Garn! You hit me first," repeated the young man sullenly. "And I never took your wallet. It fell out, I expect. Go on, ask me to turn out me pockets, if you like," he shouted angrily. "I ain't got yer bl ——"

"'Ere, 'ere," admonished the policeman, left rather behind by these swift interchanges, and trying at the same time to keep back the small crowd that was now collecting. "Now, sir," he continued to Vallance, "do you make a charge? What do you say exactly?"

Mr. Vallance appeared to think rapidly. He was beginning to see through the game now, and he decided to call the other's bluff. "You said you'd turn your pockets out?"

"I did."

"Well, I'll *search* you, if you don't mind," he said, with an unpleasant smile, "and the constable can help."

The other was forced to agree.

To Vallance's complete surprise, however, nothing was found, nor was it in his companion's bag or concealed about her.

"Let's 'ave a look on the ground then," said the constable, a little coldly, and the crowd helped in the search.

But nothing was found anywhere near the scene of the struggle.

The policeman scratched his head. This was indeed a problem. "Did any of you see what happened?" he next asked the crowd at large.

The stolid-faced circle was drawing back noncommittally when a super-refined voice at the back said, "Yes, I did," and a very over-dressed, much painted young lady put herself forward.

"I was on my way home and I happened to be going in the same direction as this gentleman," she began with great emphasis, apparently anxious that the constable should not misconstrue her motives. "I was quite close and I heard him say to the young man, 'You stop swearing at that poor girl' . . ."

"What an infernal lie!" cried Vallance furiously. "I hope you aren't believing this—er—lady."

The policeman scratched his head again. He saw that the painted houri was not good evidence. She might have just met with a rebuff and merely be getting her own back. Then he saw the glow of a cigarette from a seat under one of the trees about twenty feet away. This offered a possible solution. He started ponderously across the intervening space. The stranger, who appeared a slight well-dressed man, got up and advanced to meet him.

"Have you been sitting there long, sir?" he began. "This gentleman says . . ."

"As a matter of fact, constable," answered the other stiffly, "I saw more or less everything that happened."

Mr. Vallance turned to him with quick relief and a triumphant smile in the young man's direction.

"What did happen, sir?"

"I didn't venture to give my opinion before because it seemed that everyone had been paid out. But since the

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gentleman insists on misrepresentation of facts . . .” Vallance drew back in amazement, but the other continued coolly: “He interfered doubtless with the best motives in a purely private argument. He struck the first blow. He received a better one. As far as I saw, no question of robbery or wallets came into it at all.”

“Thank you, sir.” The policeman now eyed Vallance with some hostility. “That’s four against one,” he said severely, “and two are independent witnesses. You *must* have dropped your book.”

“Or perhaps you never ’ad no book,” suggested the young man.

“And just out of spite said Bert stole it,” put in the girl hotly.

Vallance looked from one to the other of the four people whose testimony had thus suddenly confounded him. At last he drew a little breath and appeared to understand something.

“All right, I make no charge,” he said, scowling.

“Nor me,” said the young man cheerfully.

“You’d better all be careful,” vaguely cautioned the constable, obviously at sea over the whole incident, and much relieved at its settlement.

“We’ve each had a slap at each other,” went on the young man, “so we’re quits. Shake ’ands, mister,” and he grinned. “Let bygones be bygones.”

But Mr. Vallance pushed his way through the crowd without a word, and hostile remarks followed him. The policeman scratched his head, dispersed the onlookers and thanked the helpful stranger, who thereupon returned to his seat and his meditative cigarette under the trees. Finally, by way of squaring off the matter, he cautioned the young man and the girl, and advised them playfully to kiss and make up. This human advice was promptly seized upon by the girl, who flung her arms

round her lover's neck and enthusiastically kissed him, to the sound of a chuckle from the stranger sitting near by and to the extreme embarrassment of the young man himself. The constable watched them off arm in arm, sighed reminiscently, patted his waistline and at last sailed slowly off down the path.

After ten minutes the gentleman under the trees rose and also walked off. In his pocket lay a wallet which had been dexterously tossed to his feet in the first few seconds of the scuffle.

Ensnconced later in the corner of a tube-carriage, he glanced through its contents and his eye lit up. It looked hopeful. "No fuss, no police, no nothing," murmured Jimmie to himself, "and we've got another clue. But Hyslop and Viv are wasted with me. They ought to be on the stage. And the Naylor kid too." He grinned suddenly as he remembered her very literal interpretation of the part assigned her. Either she was incurably romantic or else she was a fast worker.