
IX

AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW

ONCE again the Black King faced his subordinate from an armchair in his luxurious room, but this time no friendly cigar smoke hung between them. The air instead was tense with the aftermath of argument and recrimination, and as if in sympathy the September sky outside, though it was nearly noon, showed dull and grey above the housetops.

"Well, you're an infernal idiot right enough!" snapped the Black King at last, and the pale face of the man opposite grew even more pale at the malevolence in the tones. "What did you want to carry things like that about for at all?"

"I had the book in order to remember your instructions. They're not easy. Anyhow, it's all written in cipher."

"What matter? There are men who can read any cipher. Why you let them get away with it, I can't make out."

"It's all very well to swear at me, but I couldn't help it. It was a proper frame-up." The pale man's face suddenly flushed with anger. "How did I know there weren't *more* convenient witnesses? How did I know they wouldn't charge *me* with theft next? You'd be a damn' sight more angry if they'd locked me in prison. And, anyway, I don't know they've got it. They were both searched. . . ."

"Search your grandmother! It was passed to the fourth long before that."

The pale man kept silence. He had no answer. "Now you've got to get that back quick!" continued his companion. "Understand!"

"But how?"

"That's your job. Talk it over with Masters and you can have him and Fred for the job."

"But how'll I find it? How'll I . . ."

"Listen, my friend. You've let me down. You make amends, see! Otherwise, well, you're clever enough, but you have an unfortunate habit of losing your nerve if anything goes wrong. You'll do it once too often and then we'll part company."

"You don't mean you'll tell the . . ."

"I do."

"Then by God . . ." The other suddenly rose in fury. "Then I'll return the compliment."

"By all means, if you know anything. Unfortunately you don't. You meet me here. You know I'm the Black King. But you don't know who I am. You don't know where I live. Oh, I see you smile. You think I live here. Hasn't it occurred to you that I may just have hired this room as an office? In fact, even though you know a few secrets, you know nothing to harm me. Don't be a fool."

The pale-faced man sat down and wiped his glasses in silence for a while.

"Silly of me," he said at last. "I apologize. You're right, I do lose my nerve."

"We're safe enough," said the other. "Now trot along and get back that wallet of yours."

The other went out, closing the door softly behind him.

THE CIPHER NOTE-BOOK

THE stolen wallet did not provide Jimmie Rezaire with as much assistance as he had hoped; except for a little memorandum book containing notes in some sort of cipher there was little that was incriminating, or that even seemed to offer any chance of a clue to the identity of the mysterious chief of the blackmailing gang. There were two or three visiting cards inscribed "Mr. Rupert Vallance," a couple of pound notes and a fragment of paper bearing a telephone number which turned out to be merely that of the Wellingford Hotel. There was also a typewritten letter from the management of the Granada Restaurant, presumably sent to Mr. Vallance—though the actual name and address of the recipient, which latter might have been of some value to Jimmie, had been purposely torn off the bottom of the sheet. The letter merely stated simply that the management noted he would be in town again from 5th to 13th of September and that a table would be reserved as usual between those dates. Lastly, there was a small key, contained inside a white envelope which bore the name "Sir Victor Ballarat" in a thin untidy hand on the outside.

And that was all. By no means the glaring finger posts to the identity of the Black King that Jimmie had hoped to find. True, there was the note-book, but by late the following evening neither Jimmie, Viv nor Hyslop had been able to make out a single word, for the cipher appeared quite arbitrary and to be based on no

known rules. That it undoubtedly contained valuable information was obvious from the words "Black King" which appeared tantalizingly in full as a heading to one page; but what that information was was another matter.

"Damn!" swore Jimmie, throwing it down on his desk and taking a pull at a whisky-and-soda. He had been following up another line of approach which had just proved fruitless. "I don't believe that even the fellow who wrote it could make it out. It looks as though it had been done by a half-tight shorthand-writer who only knew Yiddish and who made up a new key-word at every four letters because he'd forgotten the old one." He sighed. "Isn't H. H. back yet, Viv?"

Viv, on a sofa in front of the study fire, said, "Do you expect him back as early as this when he's taking his little lady friend out to dinner?"

"Is that where he is?"

"You once told him," smiled Viv, "that our policy was to humor our clients."

"Humoring clients is all very fine," grumbled Jimmie, "but he seems to be conducting a high speed flirtation. Or else she is . . . Ah, here he comes," he broke off at the sound of a latch-key. "Why, dammit, he's brought her back with him!"

For Betty's fresh young laugh had sounded in the hall outside; and next minute she had entered, followed by H. H., who began apologetically:

"I asked Betty to float around, old boy, because she has something to show you. Forward, young Betty! Hand up Exhibits A and B!"

Out of her bag the girl drew two typewritten letters of a familiar brand and passed them across to Jimmie, who glanced rapidly through them. Both were signed "The Black King" and had been written on his ma-

chine. One was addressed to Naylor, verbosely telling him to call off Rezaire's gang, and the other was to the girl herself, suggesting that she should persuade her father to drop the matter.

"They were found in the letter-box this evening with the ordinary post," explained Betty.

"It's a wonder this fellow has time for blackmail," mused Hyslop. "He ought to be a novelist."

"H'm!" reflected Jimmie. "This means that he now definitely realizes we aren't working for love and that your father's money is behind us. And I think, Miss Naylor, that he's guessed you've been helping."

"Yes. She acted very well last night, didn't she?" put in Hyslop hastily, and avoided the girl's eye. "Real acting, don't you know?"

Jimmie ignored the interruption. "I don't think your father need worry," he continued. "He can get police protection if he likes."

Betty laughed. "He won't do that."

"I hope he's *not* going to call us off?" asked Viv. "Where'll my housekeeping money come from?"

Betty laughed again. "That's even more unlikely." She prepared to go. "Well, I'll tell him what you say."

"Yes. But let me know at once if you see anyone hanging round your house or following either of you when you go out."

"Oo! Do you think that's likely?"

"I don't know what they'll do exactly. But they'll now probably make a definite attempt to scare your father off and get us out of the game. . . ."

"Right ho!" She moved to the door. Hyslop followed her.

"Are you going to take a turn at the cipher book now, H. H.?" asked Jimmie innocently.

"Well, I'll just see this young lady home. . . ."

"Of course, yes. I was forgetting. Well, good-bye, Miss Naylor."

"I say, do call me Betty, you people; don't you know me well enough?"

"Very well, we will. Er—see that H. H. does too," he called, as she went out. "The lad's inclined to be too formal."

Miss Betty Naylor merely turned her head and put out her tongue at him in a very unladylike manner.

"Nice kid!" said Viv, as the door closed after them. "But someone must really have a serious talk with H. H., Jimmie."

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It was not long before Hyslop returned, to find Jimmie still deep in the cipher book.

"See how quick I was," he said proudly, pouring himself a drink. "Fair hands clung to the bridle rein, but duty called. 'No,' said little H. H., 'I must away back and lend Jimmie my brain. . . .'"

"Stop blathering, H. H.!" said Viv.

"Right ho! Any luck with the cipher, old Sherlock?"

"Not yet," grunted Jimmie.

"We'll solve it in time, laddie."

"I wonder," said Jimmie doubtfully. "Don't forget this is darn valuable to the Black King and he'll have a good try at getting it back."

"Does he know for certain we've got it?" asked Viv.

"Of course he does," snapped her husband. "He's not a fool. Why, even that pasty-faced Vallance guessed it was our crowd pulled that stuff on him the night before last in the Park. They know we've got this book all right, you mark my words, Viv. Got a gun, H. H.?"

"I have, old son," replied Hyslop. "This is where

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we all get our weapons ready, is it? Have you got a gun too, Viv, or are you going to rely on Sex-Appeal?"

The girl ignored him.

"Who is Sir Victor Ballarat?" she asked. "Any help there?"

"I have an idea he was in some shady law case a few years ago. I've asked my old friend Inspector Gullidge at Scotland Yard to look him up for me. But I don't yet see where he comes into this picture."

There was a silence.

"The rest of the loot isn't much help," said Hyslop at last, looking in the drawer of Jimmie's desk. "I mean, this note to Vallance from the Granada about reserving a table fits in with what I learned from the cloak-room man about his being a regular client and so on, but unfortunately it doesn't give his country address. The visiting cards tell us nothing and as for the key, we can't go round trying every blinking lock in London. About the only things I do know what to do with are those two quid notes. And," he added dismally, "in these hard times you can't do much even with those."

"Nevertheless, we've got to hammer away at the job. Here's victory to us!" And he finished his drink.

"And death to the Lord High Nigger!" added Hyslop, doing likewise. "Whoever he may be."

"Now I'm going to have one more shot at this infernal cipher and then I'm going to turn in."

"Me to pound my ear right now," said Hyslop getting up. "Bye bye, turtle doves!"

"H. H., will you lock up?" said Jimmie, as he went. "And put the chain up too!"

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Viv had long since gone to bed and midnight had sounded before Jimmie got up and stretched his

cramped legs. Once again the meaningless jumble of figures, letters and other symbols had baffled him. Yet, he told himself, logically it should have yielded to perseverance, and imagination, because, being apparently written as an aid to memory and not as a message from one person to another, those types of ciphers which involved key-words, misplaced letters, stencils, or similar machinery of the cryptogram were unlikely to have been employed. And this meant that the cipher was probably founded on mere substitution of letters. This being so, it should have yielded to what Jimmie, who knew his Edgar Allan Poe, called the "Gold Bug" method of attack. In other words, assuming it were written in English—which he had no particular reason to doubt—then the most frequently employed symbol should denote "e," the most frequently employed English letter; the next most frequent should be "t," then "a," "o," "n," "i" and so on throughout a list well known to Jimmie from previous experience of cryptograms. Cross-verification could be obtained from the presence of double symbols, the most frequently recurring double letters being "ee," "oo" and "ff," and from the common combinations of "ing" and "the." But in spite of the sheets of jotted tabulations which surrounded him, every attempt so far had yielded nothing but gibberish, though he had even tried it by means of the frequency of letters in French as well as English.

He was just beginning to think that he would be well advised to ascertain next morning the frequency of letters in German, Italian, or some other language, when a thought struck him.

He sat down again. These opponents of his were no fools; yet he was not giving them sufficient credit for ingenuity. The owner of the note-book would also have read Edgar Allan Poe and would surely have realized

how easily substitution ciphers could be worked out by skill and patience. How then would the fellow have circumvented the method of solution by frequency of letters? How would he have done it himself? Jimmie's quick brain flickered round the problem for a while, and suddenly the obvious solution came to him. The man would have written in two languages; in alternate sentences possibly; that would upset all calculations of frequency unless it could be ascertained where each language began and left off. A hopeless task that, he mused, as he looked at the book again, for the writer had gone straight ahead without stop or punctuation of any kind.

He stared idly at the rows of meaningless symbols, hooks and crosses and letters and figures—and then all in a flash, in the way that one sometimes suddenly sees a thing afresh from gazing at it without thinking, a certain combination leaped to his eye as occurring three times on one page. He looked again carefully and at last, drawing another sheet of paper to him, jotted down the seven symbols of which it was composed. They were

5 Z + 7 + M +

Without doubt this must be a word in itself and a word in which one symbol—the +—was repeated three times. Starting from this point, Jimmie's brain worked quickly and methodically on logical lines. Either, he argued, “+” represented a consonant or else a vowel. Assuming it were a consonant, then neither “M” nor “7” could represent consonants, for combinations of three successive consonants in a word, the first and last being the same, are rare if not non-existent. Then “7” and “M” must be vowels and if so, what words ended, as this one would appear to do, with “consonant-vowel-

same consonant-vowel-same consonant?" Precious few. Let the consonant be "d" or "s" or "t" or "l" or what one liked, it would be a good tongue-twister in any language. Leaving this therefore for the moment and reverting to his first premise, Jimmie concluded that to take † as a consonant led to difficulties and that it was more likely to be a vowel. In which case "7" and "M" must now be consonants. This would be easier to work out, for he could try every vowel in turn and see what he made of the result. Below the group of symbols, therefore, he wrote down

5 Z A 7 A M A

or to avoid confusion

- - A - A - A

It looked like a lamb calling for its mother, thought Jimmie, with a smile and then, because the name had been much in his thoughts during these last days the solution leaped at him abruptly without any more ado. It could be nothing else but GRANADA. The Granada Restaurant without a doubt. And what more likely, since it was there Naylor had received his two threatening letters delivered by the man in the black suit; by Vallance himself, most likely, the owner of the note-book? Why, these ciphered sentences might relate to the presenting of those very threats; might possibly even refer to arrangements for the blackmailing of further victims.

Jimmie gave a little laugh of triumph. Then he wrote out on a fresh sheet of paper

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+	=	A
5	=	G
Z	=	R
7	=	N
M	=	D

and rubbed his hands together in joyful anticipation. He felt proud of himself and his quick brain. Physical coward he might be, he knew it only too well, but no one could say he wasn't clever. Feeling the need for an audience to his triumph and more definitely for help in the big task of deciphering which lay before him, he got up and passing through the drawing-room to the hall, made his way softly into Hyslop's bedroom.

He switched on the light and disclosed Hyslop, in pale amber silk pajamas, sitting up in bed looking at him over the top of an automatic.

"For God's sake, look out!" cried Jimmie in a sudden terror.

"You told me to be wary," explained Hyslop.

"Well, it's only me."

"Right ho, laddie," replied the young man imperturbably. "And now you've told me your secret I'll tell you mine." He sank his voice to an impressive whisper. "This gun isn't loaded."

Jimmie recovered himself. He had been afraid and he knew it. But then he realized his one great weakness and felt no shame.

"Feel like a job of work, H. H.?"

"Work!" said Hyslop reproachfully. "You wake me out of my beauty sleep at 2 A. M. and use a word like that!"

"I've practically discovered the key to that cipher," said Jimmie as casually as he could. "I want you to come and help."

"You haven't! Congrats, old lad!" Hyslop sprang up joyously and climbed into an orange silk dressing-gown, for he was a bit of an exquisite. "I'm on for anything like that!"

"You ought to be on a bit of toast," retorted Jimmie, eyeing him with disfavor. "In that rig-out you look like a scrambled egg!"

Hyslop sighed. "You don't understand CLOTHES, old horse." He slipped his gun into his dressing-gown pocket. "And now with luck," he said, following Rezaire out of the room, "we shan't be long in finding out who the Black King really is. Well done, Jimmie!"

"The thing that gave me the clue," began Rezaire, crossing the drawing-room again to the study, "was that the word . . . Good God!" he broke off.

"What's up?"

"The—the note-book?" stammered Jimmie, and pointed to the spot on his desk where he had laid it down when he went out. "It's gone!"

XI

THE FIRST CLASH

IN an instant Jimmie recovered himself. "Quick!" he jerked out. "The front door! I'll wake Joe. We must catch the fellow who's done this."

Hyslop darted off, but in a second he was back again. He had seen that the door had not been touched and that the chain was still up. No matter how an entrance had been effected, one thing was clear. Either the thief had got out by some other way than the front door, or else he was still in the flat.

In another second Jimmie rejoined him and Hyslop quickly told him what he thought. Jimmie nodded, glanced swiftly round the room. "The only way into the study is through the drawing-room," he said, "and I was in sight of the drawing-room door practically all the time I was talking in your bedroom. . . . Wait a minute!" . . . he broke off and went back into the drawing-room where he tested, for some reason of his own, the door of a bookcase which stood across a corner and then shook his head.

He returned to the study with a puzzled expression, looked round again and suddenly attracted Hyslop's attention with a swift signal.

The curtains which hung across the window had swayed slightly as if in a breeze. With his automatic ready Hyslop rushed across and pulled the curtains aside. The French window which led on to a small balcony was swinging open.

"How in hell . . ." began Jimmie, but Hyslop, now outside, called: "Here! Quick!"

Jimmie ran over and saw on the balcony rail the two hooks of the top of a rope ladder. In a flash he grasped the method of entry. The ladder, or else a cord to which the ladder was subsequently attached, had been thrown up from the similar balcony of the flat below, left empty by the young man who had gone lately to Switzerland.

"Damn!" he swore softly. "Wonder I never heard anything!"

He peered right over and saw that the rope ladder was still gently swaying. Someone must have been on it but a moment before. The thief had delayed before descending—had perhaps still been outside when the loss was discovered.

"We may catch him yet, H. H.," he cried excitedly. But Hyslop had already rushed back into the hall and Jimmie heard him telling Joe Plumer, whom he had encountered in the drawing-room, to follow him.

"Get the night-porter!" shouted Jimmie after him. "And Ah Sin too, if you want . . . Hullo, Viv!" he broke off as his wife entered in a business-like manner, a small gun in her hand. "This is the Black King's come-back. Didn't I tell you?"

"Have they had any luck?"

"'Fraid so. The fellow was too clever. He's got the note-book; just as I had the clue too, blast him! However, we may get it back yet if we're quick." He unhooked the rope ladder from the balcony and pushed it over into the night. "Stop 'em coming up here again anyway," he muttered, as he seized a revolver from a drawer in the desk. "You wait here, my dear! Don't let old Harriet wake up and shriek!"

He ran back into the drawing-room, Viv following, and went straight to the bookcase in the corner. At the side of this he pressed a certain carved knob. The whole

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front, books and all, at once swung out, disclosing a small cage-like lift just big enough for two.

"I'm going to help H. H.," he continued. "I've just realized there may be more than one of them in on this and he may be glad of it."

He pressed one of the buttons inside the lift, and abruptly it sank out of sight. He grinned cheerfully at Viv as his face disappeared below the floor level, and she calmly shut the false door after her and went in search of Harriet the cook, only to find her perfectly calm and phlegmatic. Indeed, she had been chosen by Jimmie for that very quality. She had originally come from an actor's household and, as she had explained, was "useter noisy nights."

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Hyslop, a flying apparition in amber pajamas and orange dressing-gown, was just in time. As he raced down the central staircase to the floor below, he saw the door of the unoccupied No. 13 flat open a chink, then shut again abruptly. Ah, thought the young man, the thief had obviously decided not to make a sudden rush for it after all. The empty flat had apparently been entered, with a skeleton key, so that no tell-tale signs showed in the outer door; and evidently, therefore, the man inside was lying low, counting on those upstairs not finding the rope ladder and so remaining in ignorance of the part the empty flat had played.

Hyslop smiled to himself as he realized what was in the fellow's mind. For a moment he thought of pretending to fall in with it and racing on down the stairs to find the night-porter. Then he remembered that it would be better not to get officials—perhaps even the police—into the business. It was entirely a private affair between Rezaire's lot and the Black King's people and no

outsiders were wanted—at present. And as things now were, the thief—and the precious note-book he had just regained—was trapped in the unoccupied flat; for Hyslop felt sure that Jimmie would by now have effectively disposed of the rope ladder.

He held a brief consultation with Joe Plumer, Joe strangely and hastily dressed and carrying a short length of solid rubber tube, a favorite weapon with which Rezaire swore Joe was even accustomed to sleep.

“I don’t know whether the fellow in there is armed, Joe, but he’s got something of ours. A little note-book. We’ve got to have it back. Quietly, if possible, because we don’t want to wake these other flats. Compree, my brave warrior?”

“I getcha, sir. Black King, I s’pose?”

“You’ve said it. Now, boldest is best. Nip up and get my keys while I watch.”

In a minute the stolid ex-burglar was back with a key and Hyslop, gun ready, calmly opened the door of No. 13. He grinned as he heard an audible gasp of astonishment inside and a slight scuffle. Their visitor had certainly not realized that the young man who had rented the flat and then gone to Switzerland for his lungs was no other than Hyslop himself.

Swiftly he shot his hand round the door and switched on the light.

The little hall was empty, desolate with the corpses of sheet-shrouded furniture. Two doors faced him opening onto dark rooms. Hyslop entered the hall, Joe Plumer behind him, and carefully shut the door. Then he switched off the light again. He felt too obvious standing there in view of hidden eyes. Then at once he wished he had brought a torch. It suddenly dawned on him for the first time that perhaps he had not been very wise after all in so boldly entering the flat. He had no

grounds for assuming there was only one man concerned. It was far more probable that there were quite a lot of them; and they might even be much more desperate than he anticipated—should the little note-book contain really incriminating information.

As these thoughts passed across his mind, a beam of light from a torch sprang on him. Hyslop at once pointed his automatic. But even as he realized the futility of this, a hoarse voice said, "It's no good! Put yer paws up, both of yer. And you, 'and over that gun, little yeller bird! . . ."

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When the tiny lift stopped its silent descent Jimmie kept perfectly still for some minutes. He did not know what might now be happening in the unoccupied flat; moreover, being fairly positive the Black King did not suspect the secret connection between the two floors, which he had had installed at such expense a year ago, he wanted to secure the full advantage which a surprise appearance would confer.

When he was reassured in his mind that the whirr of the lift, almost imperceptible though it had been, had not aroused any suspicion, he felt for and moved the concealing flap of a small spy hole, hidden in the moulding of a big oak cupboard which was built across the corresponding corner to the bookcase in the drawing-room above.

All was still and dark for a while; then he heard someone speak sharply in the blackness. Next moment the light was switched on and through his vantage-hole he saw Hyslop and Joe Plumer being ushered triumphantly into the room from the hall at the point of an automatic held by no less a person than Mr. Valance, who turned the key in the lock behind him. At

the moment, however, it was quite a different Mr. Vallance to the one Jimmie knew. It was a Mr. Vallance dressed for unlawful night forays. His rimless glasses had been replaced by tortoiseshell spectacles and he wore, instead of his immaculate grey, a dark, rather dirty, suit and a cloth cap pulled over his ears. He looked, in fact, like a self-conscious uncle playing the part of "Bill Sykes" at a children's fancy-dress dance. With him were two men. One was obviously an expugilist—no doubt the Fred opposite whom Jimmie had once sat in the mysterious car the night he had first investigated for Naylor. The other he soon placed as the cyclist who had watched Naylor in the Park about a week ago on the day the money had been paid over.

Rezaire studied all three men carefully, for the sooner he got to know the members of the Black King's gang by sight the better. He only wished one of them was the Black King. Jimmie was getting more and more anxious to know him as something other than a name.

"Grab some of those dust-sheets!" Vallance was ordering. "And we'll tie these two birds up and make a clean get-away. Hurry now, and never mind about the people underneath," he added, as the bulky Fred ponderously tiptoed across the room. "I've told you there's only a deaf old man living down there! . . ."

Vallance's assistants began their arrangements for securing their two prisoners with twisted dust-sheets, and it was brought home to Jimmie that he had better take a hand in the game as soon as possible. Yet of his three adversaries two still held weapons. Great care was necessary.

His opportunity, luckily, came soon. First Vallance laid his automatic on the mantelpiece in order to light a cigarette and then the ex-cyclist, who was addressed as Masters, put his beside it while he twisted up a sheet.

Fred the pugilist was doing the tying and had not got a gun—at least it was not visible. And though Hyslop's lay on a center table Jimmie knew it was unloaded. His heart began to beat faster and he laid his hand to the spring door.

A few seconds later, when during the operation of tying Hyslop up, none of the three was near the mantelpiece and the discarded automatics, Jimmie clicked open the cupboard door, shut it swiftly behind him and said dramatically:

“Good evening all!”

Vallance just collapsed on a sheeted chair. He was evidently a man not used to sudden shocks. Fred stared dully, his brain not being of the highest order. Only Masters made as if to leap for his gun, but Jimmie checked him with a motion of his own.

“Where the thundering Satan did you come from?” gasped Vallance.

“From under the gooseberry bush, old dear,” cut in the irrepressible Hyslop. “Didn't Mummie ever tell you the Facts of Life?”

“Never mind how I got here,” remarked Jimmie, walking warily over to the mantelpiece and sweeping the two guns into his pocket. “The point is I *am* here. Untie my friends, now, will you and then give me my little book.”

“It's mine and I refuse,” said Vallance, recovering himself, while Fred, at a significant movement from Jimmie, sullenly began to release Hyslop.

“Well, we'll have to go through your pockets.”

“You won't find it. Isn't it a pity you didn't decipher it, too?” he jeered. “I saw from your notes that you were getting so warm. Another hour and you might have done it. But you'll never find out who the Black King is, You'll . . .”

"Look out!" yelled Hyslop suddenly, but was too late. Under cover of his taunts and while Jimmie had been speculating in which pocket the note-book was likely to be, Vallance had been moving round to his right, leaving Masters over to the left. Acting on some plan probably preconceived for a situation such as this, Masters all at once distracted Jimmie's attention by a sudden movement and as the gun whirled round to cover him, Vallance suddenly struck at his hand from the other side.

The revolver went spinning to the floor. Automatically Jimmie swung round to meet this attack and thus gave Masters the chance he had been expecting. He at once sprang at Jimmie from behind, but was at the same instant grappled smartly by Hyslop, who had ducked under the slow Fred's arm and made a flying football tackle. Joe Plumer, only half untied, cursed loudly at being out of it, but managed to distract the pugilist by tripping him neatly up as he rushed to his companion's assistance.

The scrimmage was short and sweet. Jimmie and Vallance swayed back and forth in each other's arms, each seeking to throw the other to the ground. Hyslop, having brought Masters down with a crash, had just time to knock Jimmie's fallen gun out of harm's way under a large piece of furniture, before everything dissolved for him into a black mist as Fred the ex-pugilist struggled to his feet and got in one of the famous swings of his earlier days.

Masters scrambled up to Vallance's aid and next minute Jimmie realized he was alone against the three of them, Hyslop unconscious and Joe still out of action, though he had now nearly fought his way out of his bonds.

Vallance at once grasped the situation and decided to

make his get-away. With a mighty heave he flung Jimmie heavily to the ground. "Run!" he jerked out to his two friends, and like a flash Masters turned and made for the door into the hall. Before he reached it he remembered that it was locked and moreover, Joe Plumer, free at last and with his heavy rubber tube in his hand, was blocking the way. One glance at Joe's determined face and Masters had wheeled round and dived through the connecting door into a back room corresponding to the study above. Fred automatically followed his lead.

At this Jimmie, still struggling to his feet, could not repress a triumphant smile. He realized that Masters had believed there was another way out into the hall through the back room and that he would be able to get out of the flat before Joe could cut him off. The smile broadened to a laugh, as calling to Joe he rushed again upon Vallance. Then the laugh froze on his lips; for Vallance had snatched up an automatic and pointed it at him.

For an instant his mind worked quickly. His own gun was gone—somewhere on the floor, but he had two belonging to his opponents in his pocket. Could he get one out?

No; fear crept upon him, his own weak physical fear, and at the command of the threatening muzzle opposite, his hands went above his head, as did Joe's behind him. There was silence, broken only by the fierce panting of the three men. Inconsequently Jimmie was wondering why Vallance's two companions had not reappeared upon the realization that there was no escape by the back room, till he remembered that in all probability they would next have made for the window, hoping to find their rope ladder there and thus get away through the top flat.

Vallance too was now retreating towards the door, making the same error, and suddenly Jimmie laughed out loud. He had just remembered that the gun Vallance held had been snatched up from the table, that it was Hyslop's, and that it was unloaded. . . .

A desire to play the brave man for once in his life of physical fear rushed over him and he coolly advanced, still with raised hands, upon his pale-faced opponent.

"Get back or I'll shoot!" snarled Vallance, himself retreating, but Jimmie still advanced. If only Vallance would get into that room quickly, before his confederates found the rope ladder was gone. A plan came into his head. He ran suddenly at him, secure in his knowledge that the automatic was unloaded, and immediately learned that Vallance had been bluffing and had not dared pull the trigger. For as he rushed, the other turned tail and fled into the room behind, slamming the door in Rezaire's face.

This was just what Jimmie wanted. He snapped the key and faced triumphantly round to Joe, who with open mouth at his master's temerity, had not dared move.

"Got 'em!" cried Jimmie hoarsely. "The fools!"

"Gor blimey, guv'nor!" gasped Joe, a new admiration all over his blue unshaven face. "You ain't 'arf a lad! And 'im with a gun!"

But Rezaire was already listening at the door, standing aside lest they should fire suddenly through the lock. "They're lying low," he whispered. "But I'll have that note-book if I keep 'em there a week. . . . Here! Look after Mr. Hyslop! He's opening his eyes."

Hyslop sat up slowly.

"Golly!" he said at last. "Stand Somerset Mansions where they did? Or was it merely the ceiling!"

"It was Fred."

"Oh, the ex-Wapping Basher. What a charming

child he must have been! Do you think his mother loved him?" He looked dazedly round the room and thanked Joe, who had procured some cold water from a tap. Then: "I take it we've been worsted?" he asked.

Jimmie shook his head. "I haven't got the book yet, but our three beauties are locked in there and keeping as quiet as mice. They can't get out. I threw their ladder overboard. It's a twelve foot drop to the balcony of No. 11 below and a damn difficult one too . . ."

"And fifty foot to the pavement if they catch a non-stop," put in Hyslop.

A sudden little click sounded from behind. Jimmie whirled round, gun in hand, but it was only the door of the cupboard swinging open to disclose Viv in the lift. With her was a small and impassive Chinese dressed in blue.

"Here's Ah Sin!" said Viv breathlessly. "He's got news. About Flat No. 11."

"Ah Sin?" Jimmie was surprised. "What news?"

Ah Sin bowed and pointed to his throat.

"Thlee men come," he began in clipped pidgin English, "through window at back. Ah Sin say 'No can do!' Ah Sin catchee chokey." He pointed to his throat all red and bruised as if he had been half strangled. "Ah Sin no can stop them."

"By the window! Impossible! What three men?"

The little Chinaman bowed again and gave a passable description of Vallance, Masters and Fred. "Come in by window. Go out door. Down stair. Ah Sin no tell night-man. Ah Sin come up tell you."

"It's them all right. But how the . . ."

"They can't have another rope," exclaimed Hyslop. He got up. "Here! Come on, let's settle it. Give me a gun."

Jimmie handed him Vallance's automatic. Hyslop

unlocked the door and walked boldly in. Joe and his master followed.

The back room was empty, the window to the balcony wide. Jimmie rushed over. Hooked to the balcony rail was a rope ladder.

"Surely they never had another?" he began.

"I see what's happened," cried Viv. "You remember you were in a hurry, and instead of pulling the thing up you simply unhooked it and let it drop from above. Well—not unnaturally, when you come to think of it—they had lashed the *bottom* end to this rail down here to steady it. . . ."

"And there it was waiting for them," concluded Jimmie disgustedly. "So while we were congratulating ourselves up here, they were getting down and away through No. 11. And we've lost our book! . . . Never mind, we've still got some clues to work on. Let's go to bed. Cheer up, Ah Sin, you couldn't help it! . . ."

"All laighte. Good naighte."

"What narks *mè*, gov'nor," said Joe suddenly, as the Chinaman retired, "is to lose the beggars after the way you walked right up to that fellow's gun and frightened 'im inside."

"Gosh, old son!" cried Hyslop in unflattering surprise. "Did you do that?"

Jimmie smiled faintly. "As a matter of fact, H. H., it was your gun he'd picked up. I knew it was unloaded, but he didn't."

Hyslop's jaw dropped. For once he was staggered out of his habitual flippancy.

"But good God, man, it *was* loaded. I loaded it on the stairs before I came in here."

Jimmie gazed at him for a moment and then crumpled up in a dead faint.

XII

GULLIDGE HELPS

JIMMIE REZAIRE asked at Scotland Yard for Detective-Inspector Gullidge, and a moment later Gullidge, in an evident hurry, entered the little room where he waited.

"Afternoon, Rezaire," he said. "Thought you said you would look in this morning?"

"Had a lot of work to do," lied Jimmie, who had spent the morning in bed after the exciting series of midnight events at the flat.

"Well, here's what you asked me for the other day," said Gullidge, handing him a paper. "Now if there's anything else, you'll have to accompany me along Whitehall, because I'm in a hurry." He spoke coldly, for between the Yard Inspector and Jimmie Rezaire there had always existed a certain amount of hostility ever since Jimmie, fresh from prison, had, by chance, come up against a gang of spies and working on behalf of the Secret Service—to Gullidge's concealed annoyance—had managed to break up the gang.* Gullidge was forced to admire the other's ingenuity and skill and gave him assistance now and then from police records inaccessible to Jimmie in return for occasional pieces of information of value to himself, but he could never be friendly with such a doubtful inquiry agent as Rezaire. Nevertheless, he kept in with him, for when he was called in at the end of a case to make an arrest, he got the credit for Rezaire's work.

* For these events read "The Secret Trail" by the same author.

"Tell me," said Jimmie, as they walked down Whitehall. "How can I find out the owner of a car of which I know the number? Not being a good little detective, I was merely snubbed in three lines by the registration authorities."

"Give me the number," growled Gullidge. "I'll do it for you."

"Thanks. OR1427 and HB7126. Also," added Jimmie, looking innocently at the sky as Gullidge wrote them down, "XD7503."

The Inspector jumped suddenly. "What do you know about that one?" he queried in great surprise. "That one was once used as a blind by this mysterious Black King in the Sleemouth case. We've been looking for the car that had it ever since. Actually XD7503 belongs to a derelict Ford in a Euston Road Garage."

"Perhaps," said Jimmie, "the Black King's still using that number," and could not resist adding, "To tell you the truth I was riding in it about a week ago. I keep rotten company. You see," he explained, as the other stared at him, "I'm working on the latest Black King case."

"Who's the latest? I haven't heard of anything."

"Oh, a friend of mine. He didn't want to tell the police. He's paid up, I fear, but he's asked me to assist him to a closer acquaintance with the Black King."

"We never hear of these cases till afterwards," complained Gullidge, "or we might have got the fellow by now."

Jimmie, who loved pulling police legs, nearly murmured "Sleemouth" but remembered just in time that he needed all the assistance he could get from Gullidge. "Oh, well," he remarked instead, "you know how shy people are. Anyway, I'll hand the Black King over to you if I tie him up."

Gullidge was silent, wondering whether this was a compliment or an insult.

"Know a man called Vallance?" asked Jimmie after a while. "White-faced, rather dapper, wears glasses?"

"No. I don't think he's in the gallery. He sounds rather like . . . No, I don't know him."

"I'll tell you something, Inspector, if you have dealings with the Black King—before I hand him over to you to arrest—remember that he's got a big crowd working for him."

"I know that," snapped Gullidge.

"And one of them," continued Jimmie imperturbably, "is either a waiter or a hall-porter at the Granada Restaurant."

"What makes you think that?"

"I've been looking up my files. In nearly all the cases the threatening letters were delivered while the victims were lunching, or waiting, or leaving, or something or other to do with the Granada."

"Doesn't follow. All these famous—or infamous—people, the kind that get blackmail put across them, do go there at some time or another. It's the swellest place in town."

"I know, but they have homes—other addresses. Yet the thing happens at the Granada. Why? Because the Black King's got one of his underlings well planted there, not only, mark you, to help in delivering messages, but principally to cover up clues and block inquiries."

"But how do you know?"

"I guessed something of the sort from using my brains and from reading a very interesting little notebook which unfortunately I didn't have time to finish."

"Why not?"

"Because the friend from whom I borrowed it wanted

it back again," replied Jimmie very seriously. "However, I'm going to investigate those Granada hall-porters and waiters one day soon, when I've followed up some other clues."

"Talking of clues and messages, I'll give you a hint now, Rezaire." Gullidge was quite expansive. "Have you studied the Black King's threatening letters to your friend?"

"For finger-prints?"

"Finger-prints be damned! I mean the typewriting. They *are* in type, of course?"

"Yes."

"Well, you know how individual a typewriter is—almost as much so as handwriting. If you examine all the Black King's letters, which in every case I've come across have been typed on the same machine, you'll see that it's a machine which has both the 's' and the 't' badly out of alignment. One sticks up from the line and the other drops below it. It's a wonder to me a clever fellow like the Black King hasn't realized it. Except that I suppose he's got his typewriter well hidden away. But find the typewriter that has those two letters out of alignment like that, and you won't be far off your man. Well, I must leave you here. I've got to arrest a fellow," he added, with a solemn look.

"Don't arrest the Black King yet," countered Jimmie. "Leave him to me till I call 'Help'!"

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Left alone, Jimmie Rezaire determined to go back and hold a consultation with Hyslop, who though still nursing a dizzy head in his bedroom, was otherwise fit and well again.

On his way back on the top of a bus he read the slip of paper Gullidge had given him. It contained the in-

formation he had asked for about the name found in Vallance's pocketbook—"Sir Victor Ballarat."

"Ah, I was right. He *was* in a case," he murmured, as he glanced through the brief notes.

"*Sir Victor Ballarat,*" he read. "*Has had a doubtful business career. Made money in munitions in the war and was given knighthood. Trouble with authorities about factory conditions. Had to pay heavy damages to workmen injured in explosion for which he was held responsible.*

"*Later, took to Company promoting on shady lines. Landed at last two years ago on a big charge of fraud, but was acquitted. Is therefore an honest business man*—Gullidge was displaying bitterness—but *general impression is that he could have been convicted on a more serious charge had full evidence been obtainable.*

"*Now lives very quietly in isolated country house on border of Hants and Sussex. Occasionally visits town.*

"*Address: The Grange, Watermere, Sussex.*

"*Recreations: Nothing. Except (we hope) repenting of past sins.*"

Jimmie reread the paper, put it away and relapsing into thought posed himself a few questions. Why was the name of this rather unpleasant person found on an envelope in the possession of the man Vallance? And who had written that name outside, and what had originally been placed inside? Or rather what was to have been placed inside, for the envelope had apparently not yet been stuck down? Was the key to be given to this Sir Victor Ballarat? Or did it belong to Vallance, who since it was a small one had probably just slipped it inside the envelope for safety?

Jimmie considered a bit more, then a light shone suddenly upon the problem. Gullidge's notes had hinted that had sufficient evidence been forthcoming Sir Victor Bal-

larat could have been convicted on another and more serious charge. Suppose that evidence was still in existence and that people hostile to the financier had got hold of it? He could not of course be tried on the same charge, but Gullidge was inclined to the belief that it was evidence of some further breach of the law which would put him behind the bars. Suppose then—Jimmie felt he was getting warm—that it was the Black King who had got hold of it, then was this not an explanation of Sir Victor Ballarat's part in the puzzle? He was another victim for the blackmailer. In fact he was probably intended to be the next after Naylor, which explained even more clearly the present connection with Vallance. Judging from the man's history he well deserved to be made to pay up, but still if only Jimmie could get in touch with him he might land the Black King properly.