
XIII

BOTH SIDES GET BUSY

“WELL, how goes the battle?” grunted Hyslop, as Jimmie returned. “Oh—erh—hell!” he groaned, holding his head suddenly. “I tried to turn the old bean too quickly. . . . Isn’t this foul? I’ve had heads like this before, but I’ve at least had the fun of leading up to them, so to speak, the previous night. This one is a regular Dead Sea fruit. I say, do I mean that or do . . .”

“Don’t babble, H. H. Where’s Viv?”

“In the drawing-room.”

In a few minutes the three were collected in Hyslop’s bedroom and Jimmie told them the latest news.

“I think you might take the little car, Viv,” he concluded, “and run down to Sussex and get a line on this Ballarat. Go by yourself and then if you want to get in close touch with him you can pull the ‘Lone-Girl-Motorist-Stranded-By-Roadside’ stuff.”

“I wonder if the poor fish knows he’s the next for blackmail yet?” asked Hyslop.

“We’ll soon discover that. And then we’ll use him as bait, like Naylor, only this time instead of catching sprats of clues we’ll land the Black King whale. Now then, H. H., it’s about time you got up. Lying there in those pajamas looking like a startled scrambled egg . . .”

“Give the egg joke a rest, laddie,” pleaded Hyslop.

“Well, egg or not, up you get.”

“When your wife has departed,” said H. H., primly.

Viv, with a laugh, left the room and Hyslop slowly began to get up. "Hullo, there's the telephone!" he cried. "I wonder if that's Betty." And in spite of his bad head and the fact that he was in the middle of putting on a dressing-gown he only reached the instrument a second after Rezaire.

"Hullo!" said Jimmie. "Yes, it is! Everything all right, Betty! . . . Is there, by Jove? What sort of man? . . . H'm! That's what I expected. . . . What? Had you better come round? No, I . . ."

Next instant Jimmie found the receiver in Hyslop's hands and heard the young man saying: "Jolly good idea! Yes, I think you'd better come. Personally, I'm on a bed of sickness—we've been having a lively time—but Jimmie will talk to you and you can tell him your guilty secrets then . . . So long!" He turned and bowed politely to Jimmie. "She's coming, old horse!"

Jimmie stared at him. "But there was no need for her to come. She only wanted to tell me that they were certain a man was now watching the house. Which is only what we've been expecting."

"Well, no *harm* in having her round, is there? I mean, I thought she'd like to see my pajamas. They've certainly provided you with enough humorous conversation . . ."

"H. H.," interrupted Jimmie seriously. "A word with you before this kid comes round."

"Say the word, laddie!"

"It's not for me to butt in, but you ought to do something about that girl. Either see less of her or . . ."

"Why?"

"She's getting darn fond of you."

"Rot! She's only young. That taxi incident pleased her sense of romance. This hanging around of hers is just sheer keenness to be in on the job and help us.

After all, the victim is her father, old horse—at least she says so . . .”

Jimmie turned away. H. H., he could see, was merely being evasive. “It’s not *my* idea: it’s Viv’s,” he remarked, “and women spot these things more surely. But the main thing is, H. H., you do your job with us first . . . I’m not going to handle all the work while you sit about with admiring flappers. . . .”

“Here, I say, old captain . . .”

“And finally, my golden hour!” continued Jimmie inexorably, “suppose you go and dress if your head’s better. You’ve been lounging about in more-than-Oriental-splendor quite long enough.”

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Betty Naylor burst into Jimmie’s flat in great excitement. “I *say*,” she began. “Isn’t it too marvellously thrilling? Isn’t it, H. H.? There definitely is a Man watching the house. He’s been opposite all day smoking cigarettes, and when I came out he followed me to the Tube station to hear where I went. So I took a ticket to Stockwell just to puzzle him.”

“It’s rather serious really,” protested Jimmie. “Look here, Betty, I want to speak to you seriously.”

“Right ho! I’m serious.”

“This affair isn’t all a game. In the very flat below this last night we’ve been having a fight with your father’s blackmailer, and H. H. got a smack on his head.”

“Oh, I *am* sorry.” She jumped off the table. “Is it all right, H. H.?”

“We think it’s affected what there was of his brain,” said Jimmie gravely.

“I hope it’s not bad really. Do let me . . .”

“Never mind about sympathy now!” said Jimmie

and Hyslop threw him a pathetically wounded glance. "The point is this: there's no doubt that the man you described to me on the phone is known as Masters, and is one of our enemies, and my own conviction is that they're watching you rather than your father."

"Me! I say! Why me?"

"They've lost their hold on your father now. They'd give a lot to have a hold again. My belief is that they'll probably make an attempt to kidnap you."

Betty giggled and Hyslop spoke sharply.

"Don't laugh, Betty. Jimmie's quite right. If they do manage to get hold of you and hide you away they'll be able to make your father cry quits and drop the matter—and we're not in this just for fun, you know. It's a dangerous game and we're hoping to be well paid."

"I see. Yes, that would rather give them a hold."

"Of course, we should hate you to be kidnapped," resumed the young man warmly.

"Not necessarily on your account," broke in Jimmie with brutal frankness. "Principally because it'd spoil the whole show."

"Yes, I do see really, Jimmie. I'm sorry. I appear to be a weak joint in your armor."

"You will be unless you follow my instructions. I want you to promise never to take a taxi touting along the street—always pick one from the rank. Never go into quiet and unfrequented streets by yourself. Avoid going out after dark anywhere, if you can, and certainly not alone. Don't get into private cars, if it is suggested you should . . ."

"But hang it, Jimmie! I don't usually fall for men who lean out of two seaters and say, 'What about a ride, baby?' Give me a little reputation."

"I'm thinking of a doctor's car which might dart up

and offer to take you to your father, hurt in an accident and lying in hospital asking for you."

"Oh, I understand. Do people really do that?"

"They do. In short, never go anywhere on receipt of any message without first making certain it's genuine. In addition, I'm going to engage a man I know—an ex-policeman—to watch you and your house as far as possible. His name is Chalmers and he is a tall man with a red face, so you'll know who it is when you see him. Is that all clear?"

"Yes. Honestly, I don't know whether to be thrilled or frightened or what. . . . What would they do if they did kidnap me? Tie me up in a cellar?"

"They might do all sorts of unpleasant things if forced to it. But I'm afraid we should have given in first."

"I hope not. H. H., would you come and rescue me?" she went on, turning to the young man.

"Like a bally bullet, old dear," responded Hyslop fervently.

"Then that's all right."

Viv suddenly came in from Jimmie's study where she had been looking at maps of Sussex. She carried a cylindrical brown paper parcel about the size and shape of a tightly-rolled sheet of newspaper and bearing a label with Jimmie's name and address typed on it.

"By the way, Jimmie," she said, after greeting Betty, "a man brought this for you earlier this afternoon. I quite forgot to give it to you."

"What man?"

"I don't know. I was out. Joe says he was youngish and clean-shaven. In a 'quiet' suit, he called it. Like a clerk or valet."

Jimmie took the parcel and eyed it with distrust. It was heavy for its size.

"Wonder what it is?" asked Viv.

"Your new toothbrush, old lad," put in Hyslop. "I told you beauty was only attainable by intensive tooth-culture. Or perhaps it's an infernal machine from the Lord High Nigger."

Jimmie suddenly stopped wrestling with the string and his face went pale. "I—I wonder!" he began.

"I was only pulling your leg. Here, give it me."

While Jimmie watched, not without apprehension, Hyslop unwrapped the brown paper and disclosed nothing more than a bar of iron.

"What the hell's this?" asked Jimmie, taking it from him and examining both it and the wrappings without discovering any clue.

"Somebody's gone bug-house," suggested Hyslop.

"I wonder. There's no significance in this to me," he deduced, "so obviously it's simply an excuse for coming to my flat. . . . I'll see Joe about it."

Joe Plumer when questioned was able to throw some light on the matter.

"It 'appened soon after the Missus went out, guv'nor. Mr. 'Islop was asleep and I stepped out for a packet o' fags. When I come back I found the young feller outside our door. He seemed surprised."

"He would," murmured Jimmie. "He hadn't expected you back so soon. I see it now," he added, turning to Viv. "He'd watched you and me and Joe off the premises and thought there was only one sick man and old Harriet left . . ."

"It's 'Arriet's afternoon, guv'nor. She went out too."

"That makes it clearer and clearer. Well, what did you do? Go on!"

"I arst 'im what he wanted and he said he had this parcel for you. I was just going to open the door and take it in, when I suddenly thought, no, I wouldn't open

till he'd gone. Not that I didn't think I was a match for 'im, but I saw so many guns and what not last night, and I hadn't got me chewb 'andy . . ."

"Your *what?*"

"Me chewb, sir. Me rubber chewb. For conducting of an argument."

"Oh, of course. You did very well not to open. He'd have laid you out and . . ."

"I'd 'ave laid 'im out first . . ."

"I doubt it. You see, in case he was caught this innocent parcel was his escape as well as his excuse for coming." He lifted the iron bar. "More dangerous than you'd think, eh?"

"Gor lumme. I see now." Joe was much struck by the idea and contemplated it for some while before he resumed: "Well, after a bit of argifyng, he 'anded it over annoyed like and went off. Then I come in and give it to the Missus when she came back, not thinking no more of it."

"Thanks, Joe. We've had a bit of luck. That'll do."

"Now, H. H.," he continued, when Plumer, stepping proudly, had retired. "What do you make of that?"

"Why, old horse, that there was still something they wanted in this flat. As well as the note-book they got back last night."

"I agree. I must have interrupted them at work and they only had time for the book. Probably they were waiting on the balcony for a chance at the other things only we were on their track too quick."

"I have it," cried Viv. "The key was what they wanted."

"The key, no doubt."

"Looks as though we shall still have to watch and pray at nights, old lad," murmured Hyslop, fingering his head tenderly. "And all for a key *we* can't use."

His face brightened. "I hope Fred calls again," he said. "I'd like to bean him one for old sake's sake with that bar they've so conveniently left."

Joe Plumer suddenly reëntered.

"The Chink, gents," he announced informally, and showed in the inscrutable little figure of Ah Sin.

"Man call to-day at No. 11," began Ah Sin promptly. "Ask for *his* master, see *my* master, Mister Layman. Velly important. Ah Sin say no can see, master asleep. Man say *his* master come five o'clock see *my* master. Ah Sin say 'All laighte.'"

Jimmie glanced at his watch. It was ten-past four.

"What sort of man, Ah Sin?"

In his chopped words the Chinese servant described fairly accurately the same mysterious visitor who had delivered the parcel to Joe.

"Aha!" said Jimmie. "Things begin to move. Now did he go up or down after leaving you?"

"He come *fлом* topside. Go below," returned Ah Sin, with an explanatory gesture of wiry yellow fingers, then folded his arms and bowed.

"Good. Right, you can go."

"All laighte."

"Now, H. H., this is getting exciting."

"Baffled at Flat No. 15, the miscreant seeks entry at No. 11," said Hyslop, lighting a cigarette.

"That's about it. He wants to try the same balcony-climbing game, I should think. Finding last night that No. 13 wasn't so unoccupied as he thought, he's planning to use the one below where there's only a poor old deaf gentleman and a small Chinese servant."

"The Lord High Nigger's luck's badly out, isn't it?" murmured Hyslop ecstatically.

"I hope he's got a good nervous system," said Jimmie, rising. "He'll need it to stand all the surprises he's

going to get." He turned to Betty, who had been following the conversation intently, her eyes shining with excitement. "There, Betty! You've been permitted to see behind the scenes."

"I'm simply thrilled. What are you going to do? Can I stay and watch? I won't even breathe."

Jimmie smiled. "My dear, anything might happen. You really must trot off now."

"Oh, Jimmie! Please! H. H., ask him to let me stay."

"Even H. H. is not all-powerful. No. This must be left to us! And Viv will go back with you. I shan't stop worrying about you till I've got Chalmers on duty. And even then I shall worry. . . . Viv, after leaving her you can go along and fix up with Chalmers. . . . Bye, bye. . . ."

"Good-bye," said Betty, with a little sigh of resignation.

"Now, H. H.," said Jimmie, as the two girls went, "how's your head? All right, I hope, because you must really do a job of work. Now listen! . . ."

XIV

A NASTY SURPRISE

AT five o'clock a clean-shaven man who seemed from his dress to be some kind of junior clerk—the same with whom Joe had argued a few hours before—rang the bell of No. 11 Flat Somerset Mansions and waited outside in silence. With him was apparently his employer—a small man who made up for his lack of stature by perfect dress. He carried gloves, a cane, and a top hat, and looked like the junior partner of a successful business firm in the City.

The door was opened by the impassive Ah Sin.

“Is Mr. Layman at home now?” asked the exquisite. “My man here called before to inquire when he could see me. The matter is of great urgency. Here is my card!”

Ah Sin merely bowed and ushered the visitor in. But when the clerk would have entered too, Ah Sin very cleverly and swiftly, but with all the Oriental appearance of leisure, shut the door between them.

The visitor was quite noticeably taken aback by the quick manœuvre. Apparently he had not anticipated it and had no course of action ready.

He collected himself in a second. “Er—surely my man can wait in here in the hall?” he began. “He has a cold—it’s draughty . . .”

“No savvy,” rejoined Ah Sin promptly.

“I said . . . Never mind! See! Like this!” He put his hand to the lock, as if to let his companion in, but the imperturbable Ah Sin was already on the other side of the hall and holding open a door leading

to a room wherein sat a little old man with a torpedo beard and tanned face.

"You want see Mister Layman?" Ah Sin suggested blandly, and with what was obviously a gesture of annoyance the visitor was forced to comply.

The room in which he found himself was furnished in the manner he had expected of the study of an old bachelor recluse of studious habits. Glass-fronted bookshelves covered most of the wall-space, though in the gaps a few mediocre etchings fought for life on a grey wallpaper. In the far corner stood a big cabinet full of little drawers which, judging from the presence of several works on entomology scattered about, contained a collection of butterflies. Near it was a table on which stood a bronze figure of Buddha. There were two leather-covered armchairs, and a central table strewn with a litter of magnifying glasses, books, newspapers and pipes. This much the visitor noticed with swift and practiced eye; then the old man was speaking to him in a high-pitched, quavering voice.

"You will pardon my not getting up. Take a chair. Now to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"My name, Mr. Layman, is Raeburn," began the stranger, taking a seat. "I represent a firm of solicitors—Raeburn, Washington and Raeburn." He appeared to cast about in his mind for the best way of opening the conversation. "I've come on a very delicate . . ."

"Eh? I'm very deaf."

Mr. Raeburn repeated his remarks in a louder voice.

"I've come on a very delicate matter." He played with his gloves; then: "You have not always lived here?" he flung out abruptly. "Before you came to London, you . . ."

"I fail to see, sir, that my movements concern you."

"Mr. Layman," the little man leaned forward, "I

admit that they do not concern me. But they do concern one of my clients on whose behalf I am here. You lead, if I may say so, a strange life, alone here with but one servant, and that a foreigner. You rarely go out. Nothing is known about you. You receive no letters. Your life prior to coming here a year ago is a complete mystery. Perhaps," he concluded meaningly, "you pride yourself on the fact that it *is* a mystery."

"My dear sir, I don't know what you're talking about."

"One moment. I will make myself plain. You, no doubt, believe that mysterious past of yours is dead and done with. Yet there is in London a gentleman who is in possession of some documents which he asserts might shed an undesirable light on certain incidents in that past of yours should they be made public."

He stopped. The old man did not deny the statements. In fact, after a brief pause he dropped his eyes and quavered. "I don't believe it."

"You shall have proof shortly."

"It—it is impossible," cried Mr. Layman, gripping the arms of his chair.

"I regret to say that this gentleman is extremely anxious to make public these documents of which we speak."

"Who is he?"

The other shrugged his shoulders. "That I am not at liberty to disclose. I am just an intermediary."

"Why does he threaten me? Is it blackmail?"

"I am aware that people do this for money; or for revenge, or for a variety of reasons. In this case of course it is because he considers it is to the public interest to do so; otherwise a firm of our standing would not have associated itself with the matter." He paused and then added: "I am to say that he will explain his

action to you in person if you go to see him. I know nothing."

"Where is he? Where shall I? . . ."

"He is at our office—waiting. My car is outside and at your disposal. If you wish to see him, you can be there in twenty minutes, have your interview, and my car will take you back." He lay back in his chair with an air of easy assurance, albeit his fingers trembled momentarily as if he were laboring under an excitement he strove to conceal. To tell the truth, Mr. Raeburn had never expected the interview to go off so well. Fortune had indeed smiled on him.

"But I—I must know more. This is outrageous. I never heard of such a thing. I'll have you struck off . . ."

"I'm afraid you must keep calm. These things happen, and after all my firm is not to blame in carrying out our client's legal instructions."

"It's blackmail."

A reproving hand silenced his protest. "Really, sir, I must forbid that word. I know nothing beyond what I tell you. I have simply to arrange this meeting and my part ends."

"I shall inform the police at once."

"Think! Is that wise?" said the other, and his voice rang suddenly hard and metallic.

There was a silence. The old man seemed to be striving to control some strong emotion which puckered his tanned old face into a myriad wrinkles.

Mr. Raeburn at last got up.

"Well, Mr. Layman, my car is waiting. To assure you of my bona fides in the matter, I will remain here until you return, if you will permit."

"Well, I won't go," said old Mr. Layman suddenly. "That's flat."

"You're making a great mistake."

"Never mind."

"It'll only take you a bare hour."

"No. Let him come to me and speak out like a man, instead of sending imitation lawyers."

"What do you mean, 'imitation lawyers'?" Mr. Raeburn's voice was suddenly sharp, and for a moment his gaze sought the floor.

"I mean lawyers who take on affairs like this."

"Oh, I see. Not very complimentary!" he murmured, displaying, however, relief rather than annoyance. "Now do reconsider it. It'll be better for you."

"No, I won't."

Mr. Raeburn sighed. He put his hand unobtrusively in his pocket, remembered that the man who had so unfortunately been locked outside had what he sought, and then looked round. A little way behind him near the tall butterfly cabinet he saw the bronze Buddha on its table. A convenient size; and the table was conveniently placed too, standing as it did just behind Mr. Layman with his doddering head and skull cap showing invitingly over the back of the chair.

"Once more, Mr. Layman, I implore you to take this opportunity," he began, edging slightly towards the Buddha, while the old man painfully screwed his head round to keep him in view.

"I won't. And the only thing left for you to do is to go."

"Surely you are making a mistake," muttered Mr. Raeburn, without much interest, for his mind was now on something else. Eyes on the door for the remote possibility of the Chinese servant entering unexpectedly, he was already reaching out a stealthy hand behind his back and was groping for the Buddha. . . .

It was just out of reach. He stretched farther. . . .

Next instant his heart thudded suddenly against his chest and he gave a little gasp of the utmost terror. An unknown hand had obligingly placed the bronze statue in his groping fingers. . . .

At the same time a cheerful voice said in the tones of an affable stranger: "Allow me, old lad! You can't quite reach, can you!"

The heavy bronze dropped with a crash, and he whirled round to confront a young man who had apparently materialized from nowhere and now stood in the corner by the tall butterfly cabinet grinning happily back into his face.

"I saw you couldn't quite manage," explained the apparition ingratiatingly, but Mr. Raeburn, with hanging jaw, continued to stare.

"Wh—who—who are you?" he managed to stammer at last.

"Call me H. H., old dear!" said the other. "'Cos we're going to be chums. By the bye, you haven't said 'Thanks' yet for the statue."

The little man recovered his courage. "What are you doing? How did you get here?" He advanced with a murderous look—and received another shock. Behind him a strange voice said pleasantly:

"Don't be rough. He's a friend of mine!"

Mr. Raeburn whipped round and saw old Mr. Layman facing him. In his hand—an unusual toy for an old gentleman—he held a pistol.

"Did you speak?" he stuttered.

Mr. Layman nodded and moved over to him with all the sprightliness of a much younger man.

The dapper little visitor gave up.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said faintly, and sank into a chair mopping his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"You might hand over any lethal weapons you have,

old horse," said Hyslop. "Before you start to put your handkerchief back in your pocket!"

"I haven't got any. Could I do it in clothes like these? But who the devil *are* you?" he snapped, looking from one to the other. "I've heard of *you*, of course." He nodded at the young man. "You must be that young spark in the Rezaire gang from the flats above. But where do you come in, old whiskers?"

The old man smiled. "Can't you guess?"

Raeburn stared from one to the other for a moment, then said: "Good God! *Rezaire!*" He gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"I admit," replied Jimmie coolly, "that by rights I ought to be on the stage." He removed his beard, thus showing that the weather tan was but skilful paint. "But then you were pretty good yourself. When I think of our recent scene together, I can't help laughing. In fact I nearly did at one point. Me, the naughty old buster with a past, and you bluffing all you knew to get the poor old boy out of the flat and put away quietly for the night so that you could carry out your schemes. Why, I feel it's an infernal pity we had no audience."

"Or at least only a small one," said Hyslop, with a modest cough.

"But where the devil's Layman? How have you got him out of the way?"

Jimmie sighed. "You're very dense. *I'm* Layman."

"Good God. But . . . I mean he's been living here for a year." He stared incredulously. "Do you mean you own this flat too?"

"Yes. I'm the old bird who so rarely goes out, who has no letters, who, etc., etc., as I hear your man so skilfully discovered from the flat-porter to-day."

The little man still stared at him wonderingly and

then at Hyslop. "And you were just waiting for me, eh?" He looked over at the tall butterfly cabinet with a new curiosity.

Hyslop answered the look. "Quite right, old son. I'm one of the specimens from that collection. The 'Somerset Beauty' they call me—very rare. I'm dashed sorry, but there it is, don't you know."

"However," said Jimmie, with a smile and suddenly imitating an old woman's voice, "the whole thing was most instructive and I congratulate you."

The other sprang up abruptly. He recognized the voice and the remark. "You've said that to me before. Why, damn it, you were the old woman in the Park!"

"You're slow but sure, I see. . . . Yes, we met there. You were connected with the racing world at the time, and now you're a lawyer. You've come down in life!"

"I say, old boy," interrupted Hyslop, "excuse my butting in on this flow of soul, but how long does the chit-chat go on for? I mean, to horse and what not! In a word, business, don't you know?"

"Yes. I got so interested I was forgetting. Now . . ." Jimmie began, when Raeburn suddenly got up and walked to the door.

Upon Hyslop's swiftly following, he said airily:

"You can't detain me, you know."

"Oh, yes, we can. We propose to keep you here and see if any more of your friends roll up. I'm just longing to meet the Black King. Or perhaps you'll tell us who he is?"

The other smiled slowly and looked at them both in turn. Finally he said: "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I should," replied Jimmie, gazing intently at him as he stood by the door into the hall. "Very much indeed."

"I'll tell you one thing," said the other, still with that slow smile. "You don't know what you've bitten off. I'm speaking with authority when I say the Black King has never been run so close as he has by you in these last days and he's just mad."

"Good!" interjected Jimmie.

The little man's eyes blazed suddenly.

"He's never done the big thing—murder—yet, but he's ready to do it and clever enough too. And neither he nor any of his crowd are going to go behind bars without a run for their money! See! It's his lot against yours. And one or other will go right under."

As Jimmie shrank back in a sudden fright at the little man's fierce words, Hyslop interposed to save his companion's face.

"Well, you can begin going under for a start," he said flippantly.

For answer the other abruptly opened the door. Hyslop instantly gripped his arm, but he made no attempt to escape. He merely shouted: "Beat it, Davidson!"

And they heard a scurry of feet on the stairs outside the flat.

"Now it's no use your keeping me, is it?" he continued, turning back. "My friend will warn anyone who was coming here that something's wrong. Just as well, after all, that that clever Chink of yours did keep him out!"

"Still, I think you'll be useful to me just the same," said Jimmie coolly. "I'd like to know more about you, Mr.—er—Raeburn. Fan him for a start, H. H.!"

Search revealed nothing except a few cards with Raeburn, Washington & Raeburn and a Bedford Square address on them, obviously part of the make-up.

Then before Jimmie could decide definitely what he was going to do next, the prisoner solved it himself.

Standing as they now were in the doorway of the sitting-room, sudden voices on the landing outside came to their ears. They were those apparently of a man and a girl who by chance were emerging from the lift to go to the opposite flat, No. 12. In the coolest fashion possible, the little man stepped swiftly to the hall-door. Just as he got it open Jimmie grabbed him, but in the manner of one taking a polite leave, the other said loudly: "Well, thank you very much for an interesting talk. *Au revoir*," then brushed aside the detaining arm and stepped into the lift with a murmured "Thank you" to the man, who was just about to close the gate.

Jimmie shut the door and laughed.

But Hyslop said: "We're headed straight for trouble now, old boy, do you realize? Battle, murder, sudden death, and what not."

"You're right," said Jimmie, sobering up very abruptly.

"Well, that's another of the gang," commented Hyslop, leading the way back. "I wonder when we shall meet the Black King."

XV

A WARNING

SEATED at his study desk next morning, Jimmie was writing out a little bill for Mr. Naylor. He had now got fairly deeply involved in the Black King affair and decided that it was time Naylor handed over some more cash. He had already received the agreed sum of £250 to be paid before he took the job on, but now that guns had appeared in the game, he considered he was entitled to the double rates provided for. Jimmie believed in getting in money owing when he could. He had never forgotten how so nearly he had been left in the air by one Mr. James Mosse, who had tried to wriggle out of payment, once Rezaire had done what he had contracted to do.* Excitement of course was what Jimmie wanted in these affairs, excitement and the thrill of pitting his resourceful and ingenious brain against worthy adversaries; but money was an equal necessity, for he and Viv and Hyslop did themselves well.

He finished what he was doing, decided he would shortly take it over to Naylor in person and then, remembering suddenly something Gullidge had told him the previous afternoon, opened the secret drawer in which he kept the more important clues of this latest affair.

He selected two of the letters written to Naylor by the Black King and examined them. Yes, it was just as the Inspector had said. The "s" was decidedly above the general line of the other letters, the "t" noticeably

* For this read "The Trail of the Lotto" by the same author.

below it. The rest of the letters seemed more or less normal, both in imprint and position; the "s" and "t" certainly were two glaring peculiarities of the machine on which the letters had been typed. No one of any average intelligence would have the slightest difficulty in proving that these two letters had been written by a certain typewriter—could they but find it. And there of course was the catch. There must be thousands of typewriters in London, alone.

Some fallacy in his reasoning crept into Jimmie's mind, and he soon put his finger on it. The Black King—whoever he might be—had shown himself by all his actions, and in all his schemes, to be a man of great brain and organizing ability. Witness alone the incredible garment of secrecy in which despite numerous confederates he had succeeded in wrapping himself and his actions. Never in all his cases had anything come to light about him—except of course what he did not mind others knowing. Until he had met—Jimmie grinned complacently—a brain equally ingenious. Yet this master intelligence was using to send out his threatening letters—in other words potential clues to his secret—a typewriter which, in Jimmie's own thoughts a moment back, no one of any average intelligence would have the slightest difficulty in identifying as the machine from whence the letters had originated. This was not in conformity. In a word, there was something fishy.

He looked again at the two letters and compared them. Supposing they had not had those two errors which now shouted to Heaven. What would have been the next point of identification? He studied other words closely, but everything was on such a small scale. He looked round for a magnifying glass, but could not put his hand on it at once. . . .

He was still trying to recollect where it was when Hyslop lounged in.

"This note, general," he said, "is for you."

"Where from?"

"Hall-porter found it on his table. He'd been taking some old lady up in the lift and when he came back there it was. No trace of who brought it."

"That's mysterious."

"Sounds like the Lord High Nigger's touch to me."

"It is," said Jimmie, a moment later, as he glanced through a typewritten sheet which subconsciously he noted had the same irregularity of "t" and "s" as the ones he had just been studying. "Listen!" he went on, and his voice shook slightly:

"After the incidents of yesterday and the day before, I really cannot tolerate you any longer. You and yours at the instigation of that rash and foolish man Naylor, who could not let well alone, are in my way and you must go out. I warn you I am desperate, and since it is you who have made me so, you have only yourself to thank."

THE BLACK KING.

"By the way, it will simplify matters if you would let me know exactly how many of the flats in the block are yours and in what names you hold them."

He stopped. "What does he mean by that, H. H.?"

"He's just trying to be funny, old son. But he has a heavy touch. I've never heard such a long-winded fellow. Let's look round for a chap who talks like an escape of gas and we've got our man."

"I don't like this." Jimmie's face was pale.

"Well, I shall get out my second-best blunderbuss

and have the sights put up to two hundred yards. And there's a *kukri* hanging in the hall of No. 11 . . ."

"Don't be a fool, H. H.," snapped Jimmie, evidently frightened. "This man means all this. It's damn' serious. Good God, he may . . ."

"Didn't you realize the night before last it was damn' serious?" asked Hyslop, more soberly. "I did. I tell you we're in for a rough passage, but we shall come out all right, I hope." He clapped the nervous Rezaire upon the shoulder. "Buck up, Jimmie."

"I'm all right," said Jimmie fretfully. "Only don't talk so much about guns. I try not to think about them much, unless I have to."

His manner grew slowly brisker. He tossed the letter into the secret drawer with the other papers dealing with the case and clicked it out of sight. "Now I'm off to see Naylor. . . . By the way, where's Viv?"

"Round at the garage, overhauling the car, before her Sussex trip."

"I'll drop in on her as I go. Do you think I'd better take Joe or Better or someone about with me—in case the Black King tries anything? Or even Ah Sin? There's no need to conceal him now—except from the people in the Mansions, of course."

"No, old egg, I think you'll be all right in the daytime. As long as you don't take strange taxis. Or speak to strange women," he added with a grin.

"Well, bye-bye. You stay here and hold the fort."

Jimmie found Viv, very oily and business-like, greasing up the little Morris coupé, which was kept in a garage close by.

"I think I'll get off about twelve and lunch on the way at Wisley, Jimmie, and get to Watermere before tea. Then make inquiries in the neighborhood, and be

able to see if there's anything peculiar about the Ballarat man's domain just as it's getting dusk."

"Good idea. If you find you want us down there, or anything like that, phone me. We'll be in from four onwards. And Viv"—his voice grew suddenly serious—"pack a gun, will you? I've just had a letter from this gang and they really mean business."

"Right ho," answered the girl carelessly, and bent over the car. "Shall I take Joe too?"

"No, you may find it useful to be alone. You may need to vamp old Ballarat."

"Good! I'll wear my green-and-gold garters and my shortest frock!"

"Don't make it *too* short," smiled Jimmie. "Ballarat looks rather a puritan."

Jimmie moved away, turned back impulsively and kissed her, then set off for Portman Square and Mr. Naylor.

XVI

A FLANKING MOVE

ABOUT the time that Jimmie was nearing Portman Square Mr. Naylor in his study was facing his daughter across his desk. Betty's fair young face was mutinous and her lips were pouting. Her father was also obviously in a bad temper.

"Is that clear?" he snapped.

"Not the least!" snapped back Betty, who had all her father's fighting spirit. "You've given me no reason for telling me not to see him, and anyway, father, I don't see why you should choose my friends."

"My reasons are my own and you'll know them in due course, after I have seen Rezaire. My order is that you are not to have any more to do with that lot again."

"I don't see why you should order me about like that. Even if you have, for some unexplained reason, suddenly gone up in the air about Mr. Rezaire and—and the others, that shouldn't affect me. I've got a right to my own friendships."

"I suppose you're referring to that sloppy young . . ."

"Father, you know he isn't. You're not being fair."

"Perhaps he isn't," Naylor was forced to concede.

"But he looks it."

"He pulled me from under . . ."

"Good Heavens, child! I've heard that a hundred times. He only caught your arm because you were mooning about in the traffic, and now you've magnified it into a heroic film rescue. Then, just because he takes

you out to lunch and hangs round you, you fall for him. We don't know a damn thing about him, except that he's one of a dishonest gang of . . ."

"He's not! He's not!" Betty stamped her foot vehemently. "And you're talking as though I were a child unable to think for myself. I'm nineteen . . ."

"You're *only* nineteen," amended her father.

"Well, I'm a woman anyway, and it's natural, isn't it, for a woman to like a man? It's nature; otherwise the world would stop."

"Betty, what are you saying? You're not in earnest about that young spark!"

Betty flung up her head and faced her father proudly, though her face was flushed.

"Yes, I am! I'm in love with him. So there! Now say what you like."

"He's just playing you up for my money."

"He isn't. That's mean."

"He won't get it. Let me tell you you don't see a penny of mine if you go carrying on like a lovesick housemaid, believing all the pretty tales he tells you."

"He hasn't said a single thing in the way you're hinting. And it's entirely my affair who I'm in love with, isn't it? And I've only told you because you're being beastly about him and his work. Especially when they're all helping you."

"Helping!" Rage crept into Naylor's voice. "That's a good one. Why they . . ." He checked himself. "Look here, my girl, I forbid you to have anything more to do with him. That's flat!"

"And I shall do as I like. And *that's* flat!" Turning her head to hide the sudden tears of mingled wrath and unhappiness that sprang unbidden into her eyes, the girl rushed from the room, only a few seconds before Jimmie Rezaire's name was announced by the butler.

Rezaire noticed at once that the financier was laboring under emotional fury. His brows were drawn together and his voice, as he formally greeted his visitor, held an icy restraint.

"What's up?" asked Jimmie, at once. "Have they been . . ."

But the other interrupted him. "Sit down, Mr. Rezaire," he ordered curtly. "You and I must have a small talk."

"Certainly." Jimmie lowered himself into a large armchair, looking rather puzzled as he did so. "I'm listening."

Instead of sitting down Naylor came and stood over him. His arrogant gaze now intensified by anger, he glared down at Rezaire and then said surprisingly between his teeth:

"You skunk!"

Jimmie was up, facing him in an instant.

"What do you mean?"

"Is there any decency in the world?" asked the financier fiercely. "Or am I," he added rhetorically, "just the sport of every darned double-dealing four-flusher on God's earth?"

Jimmie realized at once that if he lost his temper himself, there would be a fight. Something had happened to make the other man furious with him. So he choked down his indignation and as calmly as possible said:

"Now, Mr. Naylor, I honestly haven't the vaguest idea what you're talking about. You're mad with me over something, I can see. Let's have it."

"You know well enough." The fierce eyes bored into his, but Jimmie met them. "Look into your own heart and see if you've played straight with me in this business."

Jimmie was silent a moment. Could the other be thinking he was not doing his best? Then he asked: "Will you listen to what I've got to say?"

"If you've got anything worth saying."

Jimmie at once began: "You must remember, Mr. Naylor, that I'm up against the biggest blackmailing gang that I should say has ever existed. I'm working, without police advantages, against one who has baffled the police scores of times already. I never undertook to save your £20,000. In fact, you yourself decided to lose it rather than risk exposure; and you yourself, actuated I gather by revenge, employed me to run this Black King down. So far, I admit, I haven't much to show. But you may not realize I have already been at grips with four or five of the crowd, have obtained several clues, have frightened them more than they have ever been before, and have great hopes of driving them out of business, if not handing them over to the police—unless they put me out first . . ."

Naylor, who had been listening with less and less restraint, at last burst out:

"Cut out all these *words*, man. They mean nothing. You know what I'm referring to."

"I'm damned if I do!" retorted Jimmie, with equal heat. "All I can think of is that for some reason you're sore because I haven't got the lot tucked away in stir. Yet I tell you there are precious few people could even have got that first clue without upsetting the apple cart, let alone . . ."

Naylor's hand abruptly signalled him to silence as he asked:

"Do you know what a double-crosser is?"

"Yes," said Jimmie, "but surely you don't think . . ."

"You're a double-crosser."

"Damn you," snarled Rezaire furiously, "I'm not. Take that back."

Naylor's chest swelled and his face grew red. For a moment it looked as though the two would be at grips, then Jimmie's courage deserted him.

"I apologize," he said weakly, "for losing my temper. But if you're charging me with anything for God's sake let's have the details."

For answer Naylor unlocked a drawer and handed Rezaire a paper.

The first thing Jimmie noticed about it was that it had been typed by the same machine—the Black King's—for the "s" and "t" leaped to his eye. Then with growing amazement he read, couched as usual in the Black King's verbose and florid style:

"The game has lasted long enough. My message to you about Rezaire the other day was designed to keep you in the belief that he was working against me, and thus to wring from you further payments for his kind assistance. But I now have more profitable matters to attend to so we will leave you alone. Another time you will be wiser and you will remember that most of the police are fools and most private detectives are knaves. How Rezaire and I laugh when we think how you engaged him to watch the payment to me of money that we were to divide! The enclosure will, I hope, convince you.

THE BLACK KING."

Jimmie broke off with a cackling laugh of relief. He knew just where he was now.

"But how absurd!" he cried. "You don't believe this feeble insinuation."

"I'm afraid I do," said Naylor curtly.

"But it's impossible," Jimmie stammered. Naylor must be half-witted to place credence in this rigmarole. "Doesn't this actually prove my honesty? He's written it just *because* he's getting scared of me. Fancy a chap of his brain trying to pull that poor stuff. It's a feeble attempt to discredit me with you and thus cut off my supplies and get me out of the game. . . ."

"Perhaps. But can you get round *this*—the enclosure to which he refers in his last sentence?" And he handed over a slip of paper.

Jimmie took it. It was a check for £5000 and it had been drawn on the County & Provinces Bank by no less a person than "R. Vallance." Before Jimmie had recovered from his surprise at this he received a greater one. The check was made payable to the order of "James Rezaire" and from the imprint of the official stamp of the United London Bank had actually been paid into an account in the latter.

"If it's been paid to me by Vallance why isn't my signature . . ." he began and gave a little start as he turned it over and saw the answer to his unfinished question.

It was endorsed apparently by his own signature.

Jimmie whistled, then met Naylor's furious yet triumphant gaze.

"I don't quite understand this."

"I thought you wouldn't," returned Naylor grimly.

"It's all false of course."

"But it's upset your game nevertheless. When thieves fall out . . ."

"What do you mean, my game?"

"Your game coming in with this blackmailer and plucking me. . . . And your damned yellow-haired friend making love to my girl for her money and turning her silly little head."

"Any love-making's been on her side," snapped Jimmie. "Anyway I'm not a Husband Agency for your daughter! Look after her yourself."

"God! I've been done all round. I've paid this blackmailer once, and now I'm paying him again through you for pretending to run him down. I suppose you were going to soak me up to the hilt for expenses?"

Jimmie felt this was hardly the moment to produce the little account he had brought with him.

"I'm not in with him," he retorted angrily. "Naturally I want money, but only for results. Look here," he rushed on, stung into quixotic action. "To prove that I'm really honest and out to get this bird, I tell you what I'll do; I'll waive all money you are due to pay me. For my pay I'll take the £20,000 you handed to the Black King and I'll gamble on getting it from him."

"You've got a quarter of it already," said Naylor contemptuously.

"So you *say*. But let's stick to facts. There's an offer which I put forward as a proof of my honesty. Will you take it?"

"I'll take the offer. . . ."

"Right . . ."

"But *not* the proof. This proof"—he indicated the check which Jimmie still held in his hand—"looks a stronger one to me."

"Listen to me, Mr. Naylor. I never endorsed this check. I know nothing about it. Vallance never gave me this. In fact, I have no account at this branch of the United London into which it is supposed to have been paid."

"I'm afraid," retorted Naylor coolly, "that before I made the accusation I went to a little trouble to verify some facts by a more reliable man in your line of business."

"But . . ."

"You opened an account a few days ago at the United London with fifty pounds, saying you were shortly expecting a heavy payment. Everything was apparently satisfactory to the manager and this check was almost immediately paid in over the counter by you in person. As soon as it had been passed you drew out £2000 of it in cash. Yesterday you drew out the remainder of the account all but twenty pounds."

"Rot. I haven't been near the place. I can probably prove an alibi."

"I expect," retorted Naylor caustically, "that you can."

"You reply with words," Jimmie said hotly. "I'm giving you facts."

"What facts?"

"This signature—and presumably the ones on the checks with which I am supposed to have drawn out the money again are forgeries. Good copies, but still . . ."

"Prove it," said Naylor.

"Can't be done here. You'll want a caligraphy expert for the job."

Naylor laughed and Jimmie grew angry.

"Be reasonable, man! Heavens, if I were really splitting one-three with the Black King's crowd, he would have paid me by bearer check—or by notes. Then the deal could not have been proved. But he *wanted* it to be proved—so that he could show it to you."

For the first time Naylor wavered slightly and Jimmie continued:

"Look here! Here's another idea. Come with me to the manager of this branch of the United London and see if he identifies me as the man who opened the account and signed my name."

"No harm in that," Naylor admitted at last.

"I swear to you," said Jimmie earnestly, "that this is a put-up job. A damned clever one too."

Naylor was silent for some while. At last he said: "I'll come with you. I'm a fair man and I'll reserve judgment. If I hadn't been I should have chucked you out a quarter of an hour ago."

"That," said Jimmie soberly, "is just what they were relying on."

They went out together.