
XXI

FOLLOWED

FROM the back window of the Wentley Hyslop peeped cautiously at the car behind as they threaded their way through the brightly lit London streets.

"They're still on our tail," he snapped impatiently. "Here, Jimmie, to hell with them! Let's cut out this hide and seek and go straight out after Betty."

"No," said Jimmie firmly. "That'll only mess things up. We must keep on like this for the present."

"But we're wasting *time*," the young man cried, greatly agitated.

"Never mind! Whatever happens, they must not realize we're headed for Watermere." And indeed it was hardly to be guessed by those following that a car in reality bound for Sussex would be apparently making for Barnet and the Great North road as was the Wentley.

Luck had certainly aided them that night. In the hurry of getting off Jimmie had overlooked one point. He had not foreseen that their adversaries, guessing that Naylor's household would communicate with Rezaire, might have lain in wait near Somerset Mansions to see what he would do. But at the last minute before starting he had decided in view of the fresh turn to events and the possibility of trouble, to include Joe Plumer in the expedition, leaving Ah Sin in charge of all three flats with orders to admit no one on whatever pretext, and to communicate with the police if a forcible entry were attempted. And then just as they had

started Joe had remembered he had omitted to bring his beloved "chewb" to which he was so attached and they had actually turned and gone back for it. Which had suddenly shown them that their old friend the dark red Sheffield limousine, the false XD7503, was on their track.

Their pursuers made the best of this unfortunate encounter by giving up all attempt at secrecy and openly following them; and this had decided Jimmie to go north out of London and seek there to throw them off the track before speeding south to Sussex and "Sir Ballance,"—as Hyslop had now nicknamed the revealed Sir Victor Ballarat—and the captive Betty.

"I wonder exactly what their game is," he said, looking back again as they swept through Finchley. "Even if they suspect we're for Sussex they must realize we won't go while they're on our tail."

"Perhaps that is their game," volunteered Hyslop, calmer now. "To prevent us going down there by any means. We'd better look out for trouble, Jimmie. These birds are all getting desperate now."

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Their pursuers seemed much more difficult to shake off than Jimmie had anticipated. Inexorably the Sheffield's headlights, which by then he knew well, followed the slower Wentley's every turn. At last he determined to find out just what they were after; and at a lonely part of the road he ordered Betters to slow down, and himself carefully watched the car behind.

At first it slowed down too, then as if its occupants had changed their minds it increased its speed and with klaxon shrieking suddenly stormed past them. Jimmie caught a glimpse of a set determined face—he believed that of the dapper little "Mr. Raeburn"—and then the

Sheffield was gone, the tail light winking malevolently before it swung round a corner. But as it swerved on ahead he heard a sudden sharp report and a clang of metal on metal.

"What in hell was that?" he snapped.

"Shot at our tires, or our engine, I think," said Hyslop. "Where did it go, Betters?"

"Dunno, sir. I was too busy watching 'em. I thought they were going to try to run us into the hedge and upset us."

"Hit the wing on my side, gov'nor," said Joe, sitting stolidly in front next Betters.

"Ah," said Jimmie, "then that's it, is it? To put us out of action for the night. Wait! . . ."

"Do I drive on slow, sir?"

"No, put on speed a bit and catch 'em up. I've got an idea." Jimmie, fired with some new scheme, bent to the floor boards at his feet. "H. H., pass me that petrol can quick! You, Betters, follow my instructions very carefully, see?"

"Very good, sir. Blimey, here they are waiting for us!" he cried as, accelerating round the corner, he saw the tail light of XD7503 not so far ahead. Evidently the Black King's men had slackened off to see the result of their shot.

"Right. Betters, drive up close behind. Don't be afraid if they shoot, it'll be at the car, not you."

"But I'm *in* the blinking car," muttered Alf, obeying nevertheless.

Jimmie, on his knees on the floor at the back, with Hyslop beside him, peeped over the driver's seat and watched the Sheffield now close in front and clear in their headlights. Suddenly he saw an arm and hand, holding a pistol, followed by a head peer round and take aim.

"Swerve slightly," called Jimmie to Better, and the Wentley seemed to shake herself just as a flash leaped from the menacing pistol ahead.

"Good! Now, H. H.!" he muttered, and through a gap in the floor whence Jimmie had lifted a board the young man quickly poured the contents of the petrol can he held ready.

As he did this Jimmie was issuing curt instructions to Better: "Slow down, quick before he shoots again! . . . Slower! . . . Dead slow! . . . Now stop. . . Finished, H. H.? Better, get out quick, while they're still watching and open the bonnet! . . . That's fine."

He watched the rear light ahead of them dwindle and vanish, then scrambled to his feet with a little sigh of relief. The plan seemed to be working. His enemies had seen the Wentley come to a standstill, they had seen its chauffeur get out and open the bonnet, and they would draw their own conclusions. That they would be back soon to verify this he had no doubt, and it was to meet this emergency he had poured out the petrol.

"I only hope," he muttered to H. H., "that shot didn't really hit something vital."

"We had to take a chance, laddie," replied Hyslop cheerily. "We couldn't go on till they . . ."

"Look out, here they come! . . . Better, tinker with the carburetor and look fed-up."

As the occupants of XD7503 returned to ascertain the result of their handiwork, they were hailed by Jimmie, standing in the road, while Better bent cursing over his engine. Guessing, as Jimmie had meant them to, that he did not realize it could possibly be the same car, they slowed down with apparent politeness just beyond the stranded Wentley. Their headlights shone on the dark streak of spilled petrol stretching back some fifty

yards along the main road, and Jimmie heard a voice point it out gleefully to a companion.

"Pardon me," he began, walking up to them hat in hand, "but I've just been subjected to an unheard of outrage. My carburetor's been smashed by a bullet and I'm stranded. Absolutely stranded," he repeated, that there might be no doubt about it in his enemies' minds. "Could you possibly . . ."

A head was suddenly thrust out from the big closed car.

"And serve you——well right for interfering," said the voice of "Mr. Raeburn." "Good-night, Mr. Layman—Rezaire. I expect you'll patch it up by morning."

And the car swept onward to London.

Jimmie gave it a quarter of an hour, then turned briskly to the others.

"Hop in, Betters, and turn. Then as quick as you like back to town. Take the Portsmouth road as far as Milford and I'll direct you from there. . . . There are more ways of getting rid of people than asking them to go away," he concluded with a triumphant smile.

"Where *did* that second bullet go, I wonder?" asked Hyslop, as they backed into a gateway.

"Into our spare petrol can on the running board," said Betters over his shoulder. "I spotted it while you were talking to them and I was praying they wouldn't see it too. But it means we'll soon have to stop for more juice, the way we've been wasting it like this."

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Hyslop, with mock indignation. "I needn't have sweated away pouring that blooming canful down the sink after all—if I'd known their crack shot was going to save me the trouble."

XXII

AT THE GRANGE

THE journey was uneventful and it was but half-past eleven when the Wentley's lights reflected back from a road sign which told Jimmie he was at the village of Watermere. They drew up at the Hotel entrance of the Swan, a clean and tiny country inn. A light still burned in the hall and Jimmie, inquiring for Mrs. Ratchett, was told that she was not in but was expected back any minute. Nor had she left a message.

"She's staying here the night, sir," added their informant. "If you waited she'd be in soon."

"No, I must push on," said Jimmie. "I've been delayed or I shouldn't have called so late. I've got another two miles to go yet."

"I'll tell Mrs. Ratchett you asked for her."

"Yes. But say I couldn't stop because I had another two miles to go. . . ."

"And that," he added, as the car slid onward through the village, "will hint to Viv that we're making for The Grange. I didn't want to mention it to that fellow. We're probably in the heart of the enemy's country by now."

"Do you know, old son," said Hyslop, "I've been wondering if this Sir Ballance isn't perhaps the Black King himself and this is his Secret Lair, what?"

"Don't you believe it," returned Jimmie seriously.

"Dash it. The Black King must be somebody."

"Yes, but he's a far bigger man than this fellow. Ballarat has got a yellow streak somewhere. Why, hang

it, H. H., do you think that the man who could organize this blackmailing business and carry it on successfully for so many years would have let himself be bluffed like Ballarat that night in the Park?"

"I suppose not," admitted H. H. "Well, what about the little lawyer fellow—the chap who was taking pot shots at us a couple of hours ago? Perhaps he's the Big Noise?"

"Ah, now you're talking. He is of a different calibre. But personally I haven't turned my attention to the identity of the Black King so much as to his center of operations. When we've collected enough clues we shall find they'll lead us to the right place and when we get there, there'll be even more. But first we've got to pull Betty out of this mess. Not only do we owe it to her father but . . ."

"But also," concluded Hyslop airily, "he's the man with the money. He may cough up an extra check of gratitude."

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"That's it," said Jimmie, as a white gate with "The Grange" thereon showed up on the right of the quiet country road by which they had left the village of Watermere. "No, don't turn in, you fool, Betters," he snapped, "drive on while we have a look."

It was a dark moonless night, but the black bulk of the house was just visible about fifty yards back from the road, flanked on either side by a small copse of young trees. A light shone somewhere on the ground floor; the rest of the house was in darkness. As they moved on, some outbuildings, probably old stables converted into a garage, came into sight at the back, till a high wall, no doubt enclosing a front garden, cut off their view.

"Go on till you're well away from the house," ordered Jimmie. "I don't want to run any risks."

The Wentley purred on in the wake of her headlights' glare for some two or three minutes, then at a word from Jimmie, Better's stopped and began to turn round in the narrow road.

"Pretty desolate!" remarked H. H. "Just as Viv said. No houses anywhere about here and only one farm since Watermere."

"We may liven it up a bit to-night for all we know. Better's, put out your lights. Can you see the road well enough to keep on it? Good! Now go slowly back till I tell you to stop."

At a spot which Jimmie's keen eyes had noticed on their way out, he gave the order. It was a narrow lane leading off the road just by the garden wall of The Grange and probably affording an entrance into the back premises. But the high wall on one side and a tall hedge surmounting a bank on the other also made it an ideal place in which to have a car handy, and yet concealed from anyone passing on the road itself.

"Not that anyone will pass at this time of night," said H. H. "This is only a third class road, if that."

"You never know," said Jimmie sententiously. "Precautions never hurt anyone yet. Nothing must go wrong. Now, are we ready?"

"Ready, sir," said Better's, when he had backed the car in silence and darkness a few yards down the pitch black tunnel-like lane.

"Good! Then off we go!"

Stepping silently the four men started back to the white gate of The Grange, opened it cautiously and passed like shadows up the grass at the edge of the drive till they stood on an open space in front of the house.

The light they had observed before shone from the

hall and there was also, they were now able to see, another in a curtained window to the right. The house was an old ivy-clad building of only two stories, but appeared to stretch away some distance to the back. Keeping to a strip of lawn the four began to walk stealthily round it.

Suddenly Jimmie, who was leading, stopped and touched Hyslop's arm. Silently he indicated an upper window. Behind a drawn blind a faint light flickered and then grew steady, as though someone had lighted a candle in the room.

"Kitchen-maid going to bed!" murmured Hyslop, facetious as usual. "Mummie says you mustn't look, or . . ."

Abruptly the words died on his lips as for a moment the edge of the blind was pulled aside and the shadowed form of a girl holding a candle peered out for the space of half a minute.

"Gosh! Did you see?" asked Jimmie, when the blind had dropped again.

"Yes. It was Betty."

"I could see that, you fool. What I meant was, did you see it's quite definite now that she's a prisoner. There were bars on the window."

Hyslop nodded, but could not resist saying, "Perhaps it's only the nursery. Full of little Sir Ballances in rompers and frilly drawers. Horrible! Anyway, those bars don't look strong. Suppose I shin up and see."

"No," said Jimmie.

"Why not? Sound scheme!"

"Rotten! In the first place we haven't a ladder. And secondly you might have to work on those bars quite a bit."

"Well?"

"Well, you'd probably make a noise and then it'd be

money for nothing for Ballarat. One push—and not even a Coroner would worry about an ex-crook breaking his neck while trying to burgle a house.”

“But it’s for Betty . . .”

“She’ll love visiting your grave on Sundays. . . .”

“You’re making me nervous,” murmured H. H., but appeared to see the force of it, for he said: “Well, what do we do?”

“This is where the fun begins. Now that I’m certain how we stand, I’m going to pay a call on Ballarat. I’m going to bluff him and get the girl away. I want you, H. H., to go back to the car and wait there ready—in case we want to beat it quick.”

“Right ho,” agreed Hyslop, somewhat absently.

“Well, off you go. Joe, you and Betters come with me. I don’t anticipate any rough-housing, but we’ll be prepared.”

“I got me chewb, gov’nor,” replied Joe in hopeful tones, as he followed his master to the front-door of The Grange.

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A young and swarthy manservant opened the door at Jimmie’s ring. Evidently suspicious of visitors at this late hour, he kept the door on the chain. But seeing only Jimmie standing there—for Joe and Betters had concealed themselves at either side—and receiving only a polite request for Sir Victor on an urgent matter, he took the chain off.

“Come in, sir. Sir Victor is still up.”

Jimmie came, and with him abruptly entered also his two henchmen.

The manservant started and his dark face paled.

“What’s this?” he began.

“Lead us to your master!” interrupted Jimmie.

"And quick about it!" he added, as the man demurred. "Never mind who I am. Do as I tell you!"

The man hesitated a moment longer, and finally went to a door on the right of the hall. Jimmie followed him swiftly and pushed past him as he opened it. Joe and Betters followed.

The room in which Jimmie found himself was evidently a library, for it was dark and sombre with shelves full of books ranged all round the walls and with heavy leather-covered furniture. At the side of the fireplace was a little table with an oil lamp on it, also a syphon, glasses and a whisky decanter. Near by was an arm-chair from which a man was just rising in surprise at the sudden intrusion.

"Good-evening!" said Jimmie, and his mind went back to a few nights ago when he had confronted this same man with the same remark and had watched his pasty face grow grey under the shock. Now, as then, the other's astonishment was overwhelming, and he sank back, open-mouthed, in his chair, staring as at a ghost.

"I'm sorry to give you such nasty jolts," said Rezaire, advancing with a smile. "But you never seem to be expecting me, do you?"

"Wha—what d'ye want?" stammered the other at last; then recollecting something continued hurriedly:

"I'm staying here with my friend, Sir Victor Ballarat. He's—he's . . ."

". . . A pretty good liar too," finished Jimmie for him. "No, it's no good, Mr. Vallance. I know you're really Ballarat. Now suppose you send your man away and we'll have a talk?"

The other hesitated a second, then dismissed the man-servant, whereupon Joe closed the door and he and Betters, silent and watchful, took up a position beside it.

Ballarat meanwhile drained his glass and got a grip of the situation once more.

"If you know me that saves a lot of trouble anyway," he remarked, with a false cheerfulness. "Sit down. Have a drink?"

"No, thanks," said Jimmie, and thought he heard a sniff of disapproval and disgust from Joe in the shadows behind.

"Well, I will," said Sir Victor Ballarat, and poured himself another whisky. He had been drinking fairly heavily already, Jimmie now noticed with delight, for it gave his intended bluff a better chance of success.

"What can I do for you?" continued the other, after he had resorted to his glass again. He glanced surreptitiously, Jimmie noted, at the clock which said past midnight, and added, "At this late hour."

"You can help me quite a lot," replied Jimmie sharply, "and incidentally you can help yourself. You're in a tight corner."

"Rot," replied Ballarat genially.

"First I want you to hand over Betty Naylor."

"Betty Naylor? Who's she? What the devil have I got to do with her? I don't keep a girl here. I'm a respectable . . ."

"Cut it out! Less of the Sir Victor Ballarat touch and keep to facts. You're carrying on as though we hadn't been pointing revolvers at one another and wrestling together and so on only a night or two ago." He eyed the other shrewdly. "If you don't know anything about the name Naylor, refresh your mind from your little cipher note-book. It's all down there."

The other started and Jimmie saw that his first shot had taken effect. He followed it up at once:

"Did you think that just because you saw a few preliminary scribbings of mine on my desk that I hadn't

deciphered it before you got it back?" He assumed a triumphant grin. "I'd read it all, except two pages."

"That's a lie!" Ballarat took more whisky, as if dismissing the matter, but his hand shook and he spilt some on the table. Jimmie could see his bluff had already shaken his opponent. He was not a strong character, he was cut off from the moral support of his confederates and he was by no means sober.

"You'll be able to tell whether I'm speaking truth, when you see the papers to-morrow."

"And what will be in the papers?" Ballarat inquired, with an attempt at coolness.

"You'll see!" said Jimmie darkly, and feeling that that was rather a feeble answer, went on hastily: "I've been busy in London to-night following upon certain investigations I've lately made." He paused and then shot out: "I know all about you!"

Ballarat jumped; then a superior little smile slowly spread over his face. "Perhaps," he said. "But you can't prove anything." In a burst of drunken pride he added unwisely: "There's just one document in the world that's really dangerous to me, and I know who holds that. And it isn't you."

Jimmie reflected swiftly. Ballarat had misunderstood him. Ballarat had obviously taken the remark, intended to apply to the whole gang, to refer simply to himself and to the missing evidence that would convict him of fraud, evidence whose existence Jimmie and Hyslop had already guessed. Well, Ballarat's slip had proved them right; and there was now no doubt that the Black King held this threat—in the shape of an incriminating document of some kind—over his subordinate's head to ensure obedience and loyalty. Jimmie stored this up in his mind and meanwhile reverted to his original line.

"I wasn't referring to that," he said coldly, "though that too will soon be public. I meant we know all about your present activities."

Ballarat quailed slightly and Jimmie saw that the moment was ripe for a sudden and overwhelming display of knowledge. He jumped up and stood over the other.

"What about Mr. Vallance at the Wellingford Hotel?" he shot forth accusingly, and rapidly followed with: "Who gave Naylor back his papers and then went to lunch at the Granada, leaving his car to come down here? Who has a false number ME1214 on that car when it's really OR1427? What about your convenient and very temporary account with the County and Provinces Bank for £5000? And who brought Miss Naylor down here after she had been kidnapped? And lastly who is the fool who is trying to pretend she isn't upstairs in the room with the barred window at the side of the house? Bah! Go and fetch her for me at once!"

Ballarat did not move. He sat crumpled up in his chair. His brain, already fuddled with drink, was stunned by this sudden outburst. The other had told him things he never guessed were known—particularly the truth about the numbers of his car, a small point but one about which he had been inordinately nervous. He was not sober enough to realize what a lot of bluff there was behind it all; how little real knowledge. The mental clarity temporarily given by the whisky had drained suddenly away and he was left with the impression that the cool smiling devil in front of him knew everything, had said more even than he had heard. He was suddenly convinced that the whole game was up.

"Come on! Let's have Betty Naylor!" repeated Jimmie.

"I—I can't. I daren't," muttered Ballarat, a pitiable

object with fear and whisky. "But I swear I never did anything like this before. I . . ."

An inspiration came to Jimmie. He suddenly saw the game in his hands.

"You aren't still afraid of the Black King, are you?" he asked, and saw the answer in the pallid face. "Heavens, I thought I'd made it clear to you that the whole show is finished." He glanced at his watch and spoke very impressively. "By now I may say he won't be in a position to bother you."

"What do you mean?" Ballarat pulled himself out of the chair. Fear, incredulity, relief, showed in his eyes.

"He's been rounded up by now, I tell you. All of 'em. Except you; and you're not far off."

Ballarat looked at the clock again. "But . . . No, I don't believe it. He said . . ."

"Do you want proof?" Jimmie put his hand to his pocket and pulled out a paper, but with assumed impatience suddenly thrust it back again. "Oh, why waste time? I'm not fooling you. You've got just one way of saving yourself. Hand over the girl! And help us with evidence and then we'll help you. You'll be doubly for it if they find her here. Kidnapping as well as blackmail."

"But—but—damn it!" Panic had now seized Ballarat and Jimmie felt almost a spasm of pity that this man—clever enough when not drunk and frightened—had gone under so quickly. "Damn it," he stuttered, "he promised . . . He swore to me that he would arrange my get-away. He's let me down. He . . . Blast him! I'll get even with him. If you promise to let me escape, I'll tell everything, by God."

"Right ho!" Jimmie affected unconcern to mask a sudden excitement which threatened to disrupt him.

"I'll get even with him!" swore Ballarat again, and gulped more whisky. Suddenly a cunning look came into his eyes, and he added: "If he *has* let me down?"

Something warned Jimmie to go warily at this point. He must not let the other suspect his excitement. Bluff was a delicate thing, killed by the first breath of suspicion. "Get Miss Naylor down," he said casually, "and then we'll discuss the matter."

Ballarat hesitated again.

"Oh, come on, man," said Jimmie. "If you'll come across, I'll do what I can for you. But don't play tricks on the way. I've got a car outside and I'll send it at once to fetch the police over, if you don't behave sensibly."

With a little gesture Ballarat walked to the door.

"I'll come with you, I think," said Jimmie. "Joe and Betters, you stay here. . . ."

Ballarat picked up a large electric torch from the hall table and led the way moodily upstairs. Jimmie followed warily. He did not trust the pale-faced man an inch. The fellow might veer round suddenly, and if Jimmie wasn't careful he would find himself locked in the room with Betty to await the Black King's pleasure.

At last they came to a door, which as far as Jimmie could estimate, led to the same room from which he and Hyslop had earlier on caught a glimpse of the girl.

Ballarat unlocked it and flung it open. The interior of the room was in darkness. Ballarat entered and turned his torch into a corner where was a bed.

"Betty . . ." he began, then broke off with an exclamation and flashed the torch back and forth into the other corners.

The room was quite empty and of Betty Naylor there was no sign.

XXIII

A NEAR THING

A BRIEF search at once showed the two men that the girl was not concealed anywhere in the room. Then Jimmie went to the window and pulled aside the blind. The sash was raised and two of the bars, which were worn and flimsy as wire, were bent apart, showing where the prisoner had squeezed through and made her escape down the convenient ladder of thick ivy outside.

Ballarat was evidently as much surprised as Jimmie at his prisoner having thus unexpectedly taken matters into her own hands; and the latter had no reason to suspect double-dealing. In fact, he soon began to laugh as he saw the bewildered and helpless expression on the other's face. Ballarat had far less spirit than Betty had.

"Do you know anything about this?" asked Ballarat, rounding on him furiously.

"Not a thing," said Jimmie. "Well, since she's gone there's all the more reason you should cough up everything you know. If you tell me quickly before that girl gets to the nearest police-station, I can still help you."

The other bit his finger a moment then said:

"All right. But I swear I was forced into the whole game by that devil who called himself the Black King. I first met him . . ." He broke off suddenly. "What's that?"

Jimmie too grew suddenly tense. Outside he heard, clear in the still night, the purr of a car coming up the drive and saw the reflection of its headlights on the tree

trunks at the side of the house as it swung round to halt before the front door.

"Is—is it the police?" asked Ballarat, and his voice was shaking.

Jimmie did not answer. He moved swiftly to the door. It had just occurred to him that it might be Hyslop coming to warn him that something was wrong and that they must make a quick get-away.

At that moment a door banged downstairs and he heard an indistinct voice in the hall. It was not Hyslop's voice, he was certain; and Jimmie began to tiptoe forward to the head of the staircase to see who it was.

Next minute he had been pushed violently aside as Ballarat, apparently recognizing the newcomer, rushed past him and raced down the stairs shouting loudly: "Look out! Rezaire's here!"

Jimmie cursed heartily and sped after him, realizing at once that others of the gang had most inopportunistically arrived on the scene. But he lost his way momentarily in the darkness of the unfamiliar house and as he blundered about he heard a man say sharply, "What?" and then heard Ballarat's breathless explanations, concluding with an incredulous: "But are you sure everything's all right? He said you'd been pinched? . . ."

Jimmie's heart jumped suddenly at these words, for their meaning was clear. The new arrival could be none other than the Black King himself. Though the unexpected turn of events had been overwhelmingly unfortunate for his plans—since he felt sure that Ballarat would in another minute have told all he knew—yet it had its compensations. At least he would see the Black King face to face.

He rounded the angle of the stairs and abruptly stopped. A group of men, silently hostile, faced him from the hall below. They held no visible weapons, but

the hands of at least two were ominously in their side pockets, and Jimmie knew he was covered. His gaze moved swiftly from figure to figure—the fellow called Masters, Ballarat, the swarthy manservant, a man dressed as a chauffeur, and looming in the background the unpleasant battered face of Fred the ex-pugilist. Nearly all the gang-members he knew—with the exception of the little “Raeburn”—were present; and there was in addition one other. Standing on the side of Ballarat, now rapidly regaining his courage, was a figure on which Jimmie’s gaze came definitely to rest. It was without doubt the man known to the police as the Black King—Jimmie Rezaire’s most formidable opponent.

He was, Jimmie saw, a man of less than medium height, though his figure, whether full or slender, was concealed by a thick overcoat in the side pockets of which his hands were thrust. But what made Rezaire grit his teeth with fury was that Ballarat’s hurried warning had apparently just given his leader time to conceal his features. For over his whole head and down to his shoulders, the Black King wore a large mask of black silk, through two holes in which his eyes glittered menacingly. A certain arrogance of bearing alone seemed to strike a chord in Jimmie’s mind; apart from that his arch-enemy’s real identity was as much a mystery as ever.

Nor, it appeared, was the Black King going to risk even speaking aloud, for fear doubtless lest his enemy should either recognize his voice or memorize it as a future clue; for as Jimmie stood silently at the angle of the stairs, the dark figure bent to Masters at his side and whispered something in his ear. Whereupon Masters called out: “Come on down, Mr. Rezaire.”

Jimmie began to descend and Masters continued with

genuine admiration: "You're a wonder, really! When you're not miraculously changing your identity you're miraculously changing your position in space. We understood you'd been nicely ditched on the other side of London."

"Came by aeroplane," responded Jimmie airily. He looked slowly round the group as he descended and wondered what the next move was to be. Ballarat, he noticed, had by now completely recovered his self-possession, doubtless at the advent of his master, and no longer bore any resemblance to the fear-stricken creature who had threatened to betray everything because he believed he had been let down. What a pity that bluff had just failed, thought Jimmie. He would never be able to do it again. But this advantage he at least had gained. He knew now that in Ballarat lay the real weak spot in the Black King's armor.

By now he had reached the bottom of the stairs and Masters, evidently the Black King's mouthpiece, was saying:

"Now perhaps you'll tell us what you're doing here?"

"I've just told you," interrupted Ballarat irritably, but the Black King tapped him smartly on the arm and he relapsed into silence.

"I came to visit a friend of mine—a Miss Naylor—whom you doubtless know." Jimmie spoke slowly and deliberately, playing for time; for already his mind was busy with a plan for escape from the awkward situation in which he had been landed. It would have to be a sudden rush, he decided, because with half-a-dozen of them there watching him, that would quite possibly be the last thing they would expect. "But as Miss Naylor," he continued, "is no longer upstairs there seems to be hardly any need for me to stay. I expect I know where she is," he lied maliciously.

With a chuckle of joy he perceived that he had caused a sensation.

"What do you mean?" snapped Masters.

Jimmie glanced cheerfully at Ballarat. "Didn't you tell them, Sir—ah—Victor? Or were you so glad to see your little playmates again?"

"I . . ." began Ballarat, trying to answer the fierce glitter of his master's eyes, "I—forgot in the excitement of your arrival."

"In the excitement you forgot a lot of things," continued Jimmie coolly. His eye strayed for a moment past the big form of Fred, who blocked the doorway. "In fact, I wouldn't mind betting you forgot to tell His Royal Blackness that there are two of my men in your library yonder."

He chuckled again, as he saw Ballarat's jaw drop, while Masters gave an exclamation of anger and surprise.

The Black King, however, made a sudden sharp gesture and instantly the chauffeur and the swarthy manservant whipped out guns and advanced to the library door. Masters moved up in support. The Black King himself, Jimmie was delighted to note, displayed a sudden desire not to get too near any possible battle, while Ballarat was still intent on excusing himself. Only the burly Fred stolidly kept the doorway, his little pig-eyes on Jimmie and his hand in his jacket pocket.

Jimmie looked straight into his forbidding face and smiled. Then once again he looked past him and this time he nodded slightly.

Next minute there was an almost imperceptible thud and the big Fred sagged at the knees and sprawled forward. He was hardly on the ground before Jimmie's foot took off from the small of his back as he darted straight out into the night.

He heard a cry and a shot, then with a sudden change from light to darkness he nearly blundered into the big car that stood to the right of the entrance. But a large and helpful hand seized his arm and steered him round it.

"This way, gov'nor," came Joe's hoarse whisper, and Jimmie found himself running lightly down the drive, Joe Plumer lumbering at his side. Ahead of them the shadowy form of Betters was also in flight.

Angry figures clustered in the lighted doorway behind, but though Jimmie, glancing hurriedly back, thought he saw one of them break away into the bushes at the side of the house, there was no attempt at pursuit. Another solitary shot followed them; then Jimmie heard a voice say: "Don't fire, you fool!"

"Good for you, Joe," breathed Jimmie, as they felt their way more slowly now out into the dark road. "You got out of the window, I suppose?"

"Directly we 'eard 'em come, gov'nor. But it was Alf Betters thought of coshing that big bruiser," he added regretfully, "not me. I ain't good at brain work."

"But you caught on to my signals beautifully, Joe," praised Jimmie. "And you've done Mr. Hyslop a good turn by slogging his friend Fred!"

"Lucky I brought me chewb," grunted Joe modestly. "'Ullo, who's this?"

A dark figure had shown up in the road a few yards ahead.

"It's only Hyslop," said Jimmie thankfully, as he heard Betters speak to him, then added sharply: "You ought to have been waiting at the car, H. H."

"Frightfully sorry, laddie, and all that, but I had a little scheme of my own. Anyway the engine's running. . . . I tell you I . . ."

"Never mind that now—we must get away damn

quick," interrupted Rezaire sharply. "'Fraid we didn't get Betty. But it's not as bad as it sounds. The kid's done a bunk on her own."

But Hyslop had already gone ahead out of range, and next minute was bringing the Wentley out of the narrow lane to the corner of the road where his three companions waited.

"Hop in quick, Joe!" ordered Rezaire. "Better, take the wheel. . . . Are you there, H. H.? I'm afraid we can't do any more good here. . . . Why, what the devil . . ."

He broke off, a note of fear in his voice. For as he scrambled into the back himself in front of Hyslop he became aware that there was already someone in the car.

"Who the hell's this?" he snapped, and to his amazement a sudden merry laugh answered him.

"Betty?"

"Sir to you!" she replied, as Alf Better slipped the Wentley silently into gear and moved off.

"She's my little scheme, Jimmie," explained Hyslop breathlessly. "In spite of what you said it struck me that 'stone walls do often ivy have and iron bars will bend.' So I nipped up and got Betty away."

"Did you climb down that ivy, Betty?" asked Jimmie, surprised at her courage.

"I did."

"Then, Jimmie," Hyslop continued, before the girl could say anything more, "I told her where the car was and sent her on to wait, and I stayed behind."

"Congratulations, both of you! But why didn't you go back to the car yourself, H. H.? You might have let us down."

"Guilty, me lud," replied the young man cheerfully. "Sheer disobedience, old top! As a matter of fact I

was really trying to let you know what I'd done, when suddenly the Travelling Circus, complete with Lord High Nigger, turned up. . . ."

"Did you see the Black King's face?" asked Jimmie eagerly.

"Unfortunately, no. But I've done something. I've got the real number of his car, the red Sheffield. It's LX2212. The number plates swivel on a central axis and are worked from the inside. The other side is of course our old friend XD7503."

"LX2212?" cried Jimmie. "Good work, H. H. Another little job for friend Gullidge to-morrow. We've not done so badly to-night after all. And now, Betty, tell us exactly what happened to you! You know, young lady, you're very lucky!"

"I am. And very penitent! I *was* a fool. You see, I first got a telephone message . . ."

"One minute, old thing," interrupted Hyslop. "Jimmie can't hear very well with his right ear. After-effects of D. T., you know. I'm sure it would be better if you changed over to his other side, so to speak?"

"Sit next you, you mean?"

"Bless me," said Hyslop unabashed, "it *would* work out like that, wouldn't it? . . ."

XXIV

A CHASE IN THE DARK

BETTY'S story was not finished before Hyslop interrupted, speaking across her to Jimmie.

"Do you realize, old lad, that we're being followed?" he asked.

Jimmie instantly peered back. They were approaching the houses of sleeping Guildford, and about half-a-mile behind them travelled the reflection of a car's headlights, visible now and then on the trees and telegraph wires which bordered the road. "Not necessarily," he said at last.

"I've been watching it for ten minutes," Hyslop continued. "Coming back the way we did we haven't been on a main road till now, so it's a funny coincidence if that car has been using exactly the same byroads as we have at this time of night."

"Oh, you're jumpy!" said Rezaire. "They wouldn't have followed us all that way."

"They guessed we'd make for town. And on a dark night like this they could have seen the reflection of our lights just as we see theirs. Anyway it's as you like, old boy. I expect we'll have a chance of knowing soon," he added, as they rounded the corner and began the steep ascent of Guildford High Street. "They've been gaining on us now we're on the main road."

At the far end of Guildford the main road forked.

"Take the right!" Jimmie ordered Betters, who was now driving, and a few minutes later when he saw that the car behind, whose strong headlights were now dis-

tinctly visible, had also taken the same road, he gave the order to turn off to the left at the first opportunity and so seek the other main road.

The big car behind followed this unusual manœuvre, and: "You're right, H. H!" said Jimmie.

"What are you going to do?" asked Betty, excitement in her voice.

"I suppose it's too late now to turn off the road and douse our light while they run past?" Hyslop queried.

"Yes. . . . Step on it, Better," ordered Jimmie in answer, and the Wentley leaped forward to the limit of its power.

The two cars sped onward, their sweeping lights eating up the main road, deserted at that hour. But the car behind still gained.

"Rather rough," commented Hyslop at one point, "to be chased by the same car twice in one night. At least I suppose it is the same?"

Soon the pursuing lights, like the eyes of some inexorable monster, had crept up close behind them. Though Better was giving the Wentley every ounce, the big car behind was the faster. That it was the Black King's red Sheffield car there was now no doubt; by shading his eyes from the headlights Hyslop could see the number XD7503 faint between them.

"Something will go soon!" muttered Jimmie, clinging to his seat with white face. Smooth though the road was they were bouncing on its surface like an india-rubber ball.

"What are you going to do?" asked Betty again, and Hyslop added: "They're only twenty yards behind! We've got to do something."

Jimmie was suddenly roused to desperate action.

"Damn it!" he cried. "They shot at me earlier on. I'm hanged if I don't shoot at them."

"I say!" cried Betty, intensely thrilled. "Are you really going to? It's going to be thrilling. This is a great evening."

"Is it?" rejoined Hyslop morosely, as Jimmie pulled out his gun and with a quick blow broke the little glass window at the back of the Wentley. "Personally I'd prefer a dance and a bottle at the Savoy."

"Oh, no," cried Betty ecstatically. "I love . . ."

"Shut up!" ordered Jimmie tersely, now kneeling on the seat, and with almost a gasp of surprise the girl kept silent, while he levelled his weapon as carefully as he could for the swaying and jolting of their terrific speed and took aim at the Sheffield's fat front tires.

Twice he shot without effect, while Hyslop helped him to keep steady. In front Joe and Betters crouched, not daring to let their eyes leave the grey streak of road. Behind Betty curled up silently in a corner of the seat to be out of the way. Her adventurous spirit, so far from being damped by her earlier abduction, was genuinely thrilled by the situation. To be pursued at terrific speed in a car by unscrupulous villains who had had her in their power once and wanted to get hold of her again, and to have Jimmie, and above all H. H., protecting her with guns was as much as any girl with a proper zest for adventure had a right to expect.

"Try their lights!" Hyslop was suggesting.

"No use! They'll simply follow ours!" returned Jimmie, and for the third time took careful aim.

Before he could press the trigger, however, there was a sudden sharp smack close by Hyslop's knee where he knelt beside Jimmie on the seat.

"That's their return greeting card," muttered the young man. "Betty, where are you?"

"Here!" said Betty, a little awed by the sound of a real bullet so close.

"Well, get down on the floor of the car! You'll be safer!"

"Can't I stay up here? I'm all right. I'm not afraid, you know."

"Get down!"

Betty, marvelling at herself, got down. It was hot and smelly and she felt as out of everything as if she had been a spanner, but Hyslop had told her to and he was probably right.

"That's a good girl!" He turned to Jimmie again. "For God's sake, get 'em!" he urged.

Again Jimmie fired and this time one of the big lights behind went out in a brief tinkle of glass.

"Bad luck, sir, nearly won a gold watch," Hyslop was beginning, when there was a thud and a loud hissing report beneath them. Jimmie just had time to ejaculate "Damn! They've got a back tire!" before with a cry of alarm from Better's the Wentley lurched like a ship at sea and was ploughing at terrific speed through the rough grass at the side of the road, only missing the ditch edge by a miraculous inch. The three in the back were flung inextricably together by the sudden bucketing of the car, and Hyslop believing nothing could save them from overturning, flung his arms round Betty to protect her as much as possible.

But in front Joe and Better's united strength just sufficed to hold the steering wheel, which dragging like a live thing under their hands strove to pull them over to destruction. Had the near wheel slipped into the ditch nothing could have saved them at that speed from an appalling smash.

Next minute from the off side sounded a rending scrape of metal on metal. The sudden slowing down of the Wentley both from its burst tire and the automatic removal of Better's foot from the accelerator had nearly

brought the Sheffield crashing on top of them. By a miraculous swerve its driver pulled out just in time so that fender merely touched fender. As they shot past with screeching brakes there was another report and Hyslop, now crouched in the bottom holding Betty's slim figure tightly to him, heard a bullet snap through the window glass above his head.

"Did you hear that?" mouthed Jimmie tremulously, as the Wentley ploughed to a halt. "They're out to do us in." A note of fear had crept into his voice. In imagination he heard again the singing note of the bullet so near his head. He wrestled silently with a growing terror.

Hyslop did not answer. He had suddenly become fully aware that he was holding Betty very closely and that it was very pleasant. Her body was warm and slender, the scent of her rose to his nostrils and a vital thrill swept through him. She lay very still, made no movement to get away. Had she fainted or been hurt?

"Betty?" he said apprehensively. "You all right?"

The girl's voice answered him immediately, and he awkwardly released her.

"Thought you'd thrown a faint!"

"Not me."

"'Ere, gov'nor," interrupted the voice of Joe from the front, hoarse and angry. "They've stopped too." Betters, overcome for the moment at the closeness of their escape from disaster, had collapsed over the driving wheel. "Jes' lemme get at the swine!"

"What?" cried Jimmie starting up, to perceive that the other car had pulled up some fifty yards ahead.

"They want to play some more. My! Won't Nursie be angry!" exclaimed Hyslop, and at that instant there was a spurt of flame and another sharp report from the

stationary car in front. Something tinkled just over Joe's head.

"Out of the car, quick," ordered Jimmie, with a little gasp, and was out the first.

"'Ere, blast 'em!" snarled Joe. "I'll teach the——"

"Ladies present!" said Hyslop curtly, scrambling out and pulling the girl after him.

"Never mind me!" retorted Betty, with a hysterical little laugh. "I'm not a child. I realize this isn't the drawing-room."

As the others piled out Jimmie reached into the front and switched off the headlights which were making them an easier mark. A second after, the lights of their adversaries' car went out also, and the heavy darkness of the moonless night enveloped the scene.

Gun ready, Jimmie crouched in the ditch. It seemed incredible that this was really twentieth century England and on a highroad at that. But still even on an English highroad cars are not very frequent at 2 A. M.; and Jimmie knew from experience that strange things can happen even in the civilized twentieth century and in the most unexpected places.

"Is the girl all right?" he murmured to Hyslop at his side.

"I'm here," put in Betty. "I'm jolly glad though it's a dry ditch! I say, what's going to happen now?"

"Something will come along and spoil it," groaned Hyslop, pulling back the jacket of his automatic.

Jimmie would have liked to retort "I hope it does," but only grunted instead in what he hoped was a courageous manner.

"Difficult to get a private fight even at two A. M. . . ." began Hyslop, when a shot rang out from a point about twenty yards away. Their opponents had left the Sheffield and were stalking them up the road edge.

Jimmie crouched lower. The darkness seemed suddenly alive with menace. Ordinary night noises sounded strange and threatening. The deserted Wentley at a drunken tilt loomed up to their right against the lighter darkness of the sky. Civilization seemed very far away and a vast sense of impending tragedy descended on Rezaire. He suddenly felt he must get up and run away from all this, these creeping figures in the dark that were now determined to kill him.

Joe, a little to the left, said something in an incautious voice to Betters and instantly there was another shot and a bullet zipped over the tarred road surface.

"Be silent!" ordered Jimmie, a quaver in his voice.

"Here, Betty," whispered Hyslop briskly, "you'd better get away. Slide through the hedge and go and lie down in the field till it's all over."

"No, I'll stay with you."

"Go on."

"I'm damned if I do," returned the girl tersely. "So there!"

Another shot interrupted Hyslop's answer and he felt a quick burning pain as though a red hot iron had seared his finger. He gave an involuntary cry, but this time he had seen the flash. Flinging up his arm, he fired thrice quickly at the place and heard a sudden oath. He had hit.

"And I hope it hurts," he muttered viciously, and realized that Betty was clinging to his arm.

"Are *you* hurt, my dear? Are you hurt?" she was saying, with a sob in her voice.

"Eh, what? Me? No." He quickly tied a handkerchief round his wounded finger, luckily only grazed by the bullet. Betty now only clung to his arm more tightly. Hyslop decided it was very pleasant. He felt a sudden desire to hold her in his arms again as he had

done in the car. . . . But this, he realized, when there were unscrupulous and armed enemies all round, was only practicable in Grand Opera.

"Someone in the ditch just opposite, gov'nor," muttered Joe suddenly, from the left. "'Ave a pop at 'im!"

But all at once a sound made itself heard, the faint noise of an engine at high speed. It came from the direction of Guildford. At long last another car was approaching.

It grew in volume; and Hyslop pointed to the glare of moving headlights already outlining the hedges at a slight bend two hundred yards back. "Show's over," he muttered. "I told you so."

"Perhaps it's their other car?" suggested Jimmie, with chattering teeth. "The Manchester?"

"Gosh! I never thought of that. Hardly sounds powerful enough. . . . No, it can't be," he broke off. "Look! The Sheffield is skipping off!"

He pointed up the road. The lights of the Black King's car had suddenly been switched on again and dark figures were seen hurriedly bundling into it. The low whine of a self-starter gave place to the purr of engines and even as the strange car rounded the bend their adversaries were away.

"Up quick!" called Jimmie. "We don't want to have to explain anything." He switched on the Wentley's lights while his companions hastily scrambled up from the ditch. In a few seconds they were a nonchalant little group apparently discussing a slight mishap.