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## XXIX

### THE SECOND FLOOR ROOM

THE little lift moved silently upward to the second floor of the Granada's luxurious building and Jimmie slipped out into a thickly carpeted corridor, and softly closing the gate behind him, he sent the lift down again. Then he listened intently for a moment. In case anyone should have heard the lift and look suddenly out of a doorway, his alertness was veiled by an assumed appearance of bewilderment as of one discovering himself on the wrong floor.

He could hear nothing except the faint hum of the restaurant below floating up the lift shaft. This second floor seemed quite deserted and silent, which was not unnatural, for there were, besides a few odd rooms, but two private suites, both probably empty at this hour. With a last wary glance round he turned to his right—as Havers had said—and moved down the corridor, looking for the first room on the left.

A few yards along there was a door across the corridor, but it stood open and just beyond it was the room he sought, the room in which little Mr. Dakers ostensibly carried on his Commission Agency, but in reality played a far more serious and dangerous game.

He tapped on the door, an excuse ready on his lips. No summons followed and after a moment he softly turned the handle and stepped into an empty room.

For a moment he stood by the door, his quick restless eyes alone moving hither and thither. The room had the general appearance of an office; desk, telephone,

stenographer's table with typewriter, and swivel chair, and so on, though there was nothing to indicate more particularly whether it was that of a Commission Agent or not. At any rate it belonged to someone who liked comfort, for over to the left were two luxurious padded armchairs and a table with a silver box of cigarettes, an ashtray, and an emptied liquor glass upon it. Near one of the armchairs hung conveniently the earphones of a wireless set, while a gas-fire, turned low, murmured gently in the grate, which was flanked by tall bookcases.

"Quite a home," murmured Jimmie to himself. "I'll swear he doesn't do much betting here!"

He turned to lock the door behind him and found there was no key to it. Momentarily it struck him as strange that such a secret place should have been left open to anyone who cared to walk in, and then realizing he had not much time, he began to work swiftly.

He started with the big desk by the window overlooking afternoon Piccadilly in full swing two stories below. Papers were strewn over it and in a tray were half-a-dozen letters ready for the post. His lean fingers fluttered like live things over the various documents, replacing each in exactly the same position the moment his brain had grasped its meaning. But in a few minutes he desisted. His practised eye told him that, genuine or not, they were of no use to him. Anything of real value would of course be hidden. Where, he wondered, looking round the room for a concealed safe.

A moment later he laughed at his own foolishness. There was a safe in the room but it was not concealed at all. It stood in full view by the desk, just as perhaps one might expect the safe of an innocent Commission Agent to stand. Jimmie at once knelt in front of it and his sensitive fingers ran over the lock.

Suddenly he remembered the key in his pocket, and

gave a little laugh of excitement. Was luck going to be with him all the way?

He was just feeling for it, when all at once with the agility of a rabbit he flung himself to one side and dived for the shelter of the big desk. The safe in front of which he knelt was painted green and highly polished. Reflected on this mirror-like surface Jimmie had seen an upraised arm above his head. . . .

He was just in time. There was a little whistle in the air and a thud as a rubber black-jack flashed past his ear and struck the safe. The striker could not control a little gasp of astonishment at his intended victim's apparently miraculous intuition, and it was a second before he could recover from his surprise. In that second Jimmie had ducked behind the desk where he pulled out his automatic and with a curt phrase informed his assailant that he had him covered.

Sullenly the other straightened himself, realizing his attempt had failed. He had even lost his black-jack, which had slipped from his grasp at the impact on the safe and spun away under a bookcase. He stood still with raised hands as Rezaire came warily out of concealment.

"Hullo!" said Jimmie, as he recognized his opponent. "It's you, is it? Mr. Samuel Dakers, eh? Am I to understand," he continued with a grin, "that the old established firm of Raeburn has taken to the turf? Ah, well, I'm sorry you were out when I called."

"You think yourself very clever, don't you?" said the other coolly. "What are you doing here? Conducting a law-abiding burglary?"

"No. Just looking round. But since you're here we'll have a talk. Do you mind if I see whether you've got a gun?" He ran swift hands over the other's clothes and commandeered a small automatic. Then,

since he felt he was physically a match for this small man, he put his own away.

"There are a few things I'd like to know," he began.

"I expect there are," answered Dakers. "But why should we stand?" With a faint smile he took the nearer of the two big armchairs, thus leaving for Jimmie the one in the corner and facing the light. Jimmie smiled also, seeing through the ruse to put him in a disadvantageous position, and instead took an ornate wooden chair with a high back and two arms. At which Dakers quite openly grinned.

"Now, Rezaire," he said. "What's the idea? Are you going to try and bribe me to tell secrets?"

"I'd like to know who the Black King is?"

Dakers merely rubbed his chin and murmured, "Now where have I heard that name?"

"Come on," urged Jimmie, "come across. I think your lot's pretty nearly finished by now. I know all about this room for instance and so do the police."

"Do you think so? I wonder. Cigarette?" He indicated the box.

Jimmie took one and smelt it carefully. "Not this child," he said with a grin. "I know that Kay Oh brand. I've used 'em myself."

"You seem to know a lot of things," returned the other lazily.

"Not so many that I couldn't do with a few more. Now look here. You put up a squeak and I'll do what I can for you? Otherwise you'll get a stretch with the rest."

"I'll show you one secret," agreed Dakers, still studying Jimmie with an air of amused contempt, which kept Rezaire well on his guard for trickery.

All the same he was not prepared for what followed. Murmuring, "This is the secret!" Dakers stretched out

his hand towards Jimmie and laid it on the arm of his chair. He did it all so languidly and casually that the other did not know what to suspect, before there was a little click as Dakers apparently pressed some catch concealed on the underside of the arm.

Next second Jimmie felt himself caught in an iron grip which pinned his arms to his side. Two steel bands which had apparently formed part of the back of the chair in which he sat had sprung round with swift force to the front and now held him immovably in his seat.

"Hell!" cried Rezaire suddenly. He attempted to leap up but the chair was weighted and he could barely move it an inch. He was a prisoner.

"That's the only secret I'll show you to-day," continued Dakers, getting up slowly. "Neat trick, isn't it? Fifteen bob at Gamage's. Causes roars of laughter in the home."

Jimmie did not reply. He was caught and he knew it. He understood now why Dakers had suggested they should sit and had grinned at his choice of chairs. He had been out-manœuvred then, even while he thought he was out-manœuvring his opponent. This fellow was indeed clever—clever and dangerous.

A sudden spasm of terror drove the blood from his face, as abruptly Dakers dropped his mask and bending over him said, through his teeth:

"We've been wanting you for some time, Rezaire, and now we've got you. You won't get out of here in a hurry."

Jimmie licked his dry lips. "My dear fellow," he said, and tried to control his voice. "I'm afraid you'll have to let me go. I have men watching here, my own and police."

"Let 'em watch. They won't find out anything."

Jimmie grew braver. "Unfortunately for you I took

the precaution of leaving word with my young friend that if I wasn't out within half-an-hour the Yard was to be informed."

"Unfortunately for you," Dakers said, "we also have taken precautions. If by your young friend you are thinking of that fancy fool Hyslop, whom you planted in the lounge downstairs, it may interest you to know that he had a message from you about five minutes ago telling him you were on to something good and that he was to go home and wait."

Jimmie's heart stood still. Then in a corner of his mind he found a little ray of hope. Hyslop was by no means such a fool as Dakers seemed to think. He would not be likely to believe a spurious message brought him by one of the gang. . . .

But this hope was extinguished almost as soon as it was born by Dakers' next words.

"I can guess what you're thinking," he said. "As a matter of fact, your Hyslop was given the message by a most reliable person, whom he would not hesitate to believe, and he has been watched off the premises. You see, Rezaire, we rather thought you might be coming up here this afternoon, and we were anxious not to be disturbed."

"What—what are you going to do?" stammered Jimmie.

"You have interfered with us and impeded us for several days now," accused Dakers calmly; "only three nights ago you seriously wounded one of our friends; and finally you know far too much. There is only one answer to your question: we've had enough of you and we're going to put you out. Say good-bye."

Staring wildly up into the hard cruel eyes which stared back at him, Jimmie knew that they were the eyes of a desperate man who had meant what he said.

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### XXX

#### TRAPPED

**J**IMMIE felt that he must have swooned away from sheer terror for a minute because the next thing he remembered was finding his pockets being searched methodically by the steely eyed Dakers. On a little table at his elbow lay the contents, his automatic, his small black-jack, pen-knife, cash, note-book—luckily he had not taken anything of much value with him—and the key he had obtained from Ballarat.

“Aha!” said the little man, when he came to this last. “Why did you bring this? Did you think it was the key to our secret hiding place?” He threw a quick furtive glance across the room as he spoke, but Jimmie was almost too frightened to observe it. Dakers laughed unpleasantly and continued: “Do you know what this key belongs to?”

Jimmie, sick with fear, shook his head.

“I’ll show you. It’s no secret.”

He walked to the other end of the room, but Jimmie paid no attention. He was trying to master himself sufficiently to think out a plan of escape. Already he had strained against his bonds and found that they were immovable, the two encircling steel bands being held in against his body by a spring of such terrific force that his arms were already numb from being pressed into his sides. Yet there must be some way of disengaging the spring. Dakers had pressed a little catch: could he reach it himself? He essayed it tentatively, while the other’s back was still turned and found that pinioned

as he was he could not get near it. Of course he could not, he realized. What would be the use of the chair at all if its victim were in a position to release himself? . . .

"And so," Dakers was saying, "this is all the valuable key does." He turned and Jimmie saw that he had merely opened a cellaret in the corner and taken out a whisky decanter. "It's just the sort of key Ballarat *would* carry about with him. But what a pity you should have risked your life simply to try and get at our whisky! Risked and lost," he added casually, as he poured himself out a drink.

Jimmie once more felt waves of terror submerging him. What was he to do? What could he do? He almost cried out in his agony of fear. Surely this man was only bluffing? They would not kill him here in cold blood. Then he remembered the look in the other's eyes. The stakes were too high for human life to carry any weight. He had made himself far too dangerous to the Black King to be allowed to live.

Dakers wiped his mouth with a silk handkerchief. "Talking of losing life—if it doesn't bore you," he continued, playing with his victim as a cat with a mouse, "I hope you don't think we shall leave any clues for the police. We have been very carefully considering various plans of action ready for when we should need them. We have reduced them to two and I'll tell you what they are. I'm sure you'll be interested to hear how we shall murder you and leave no evidence."

He took another drink and sat down again, while Jimmie stayed motionless with fright, sagging forward in the relentless imprisoning grip of the iron bands.

"One plan—invented by a friend of mine," continued Dakers, airily, "is to employ ordinary gas in a sort of lethal chamber. When the—er—patient has become a



corpse, It—mark the word—would be conveyed in some innocent receptacle to a certain South London boarding house where we have a pull and where a little gas-oven suicide drama would be staged. Neat, isn't it?"

He got up and went to the desk. "The other plan," he resumed, "is, I think, even nicer. To tell the truth it's my own idea, which is why I am now proposing to use it."

Opening a drawer he produced a little case containing an hypodermic syringe. "A shot of this, just enough to make you unconscious, a little row on the Thames when the tide's right and then over we push you in your sleep with a contraption of mine tied round the leg. To be precise, it's a weight, but with a soluble connection, so that after a sufficient period the—er—body bobs up again unencumbered, to become Death by Misadventure. I hope you have been paying attention," he murmured, carefully filling the little syringe from a stoppered vial. "It's very instructive."

But Jimmie had not been paying attention. Not that the ghastly cold-blooded details of his murder did not hold a sickening fascination for him, but that a new wild hope had suddenly flashed into his mind, driving out momentarily even his fear. Head bent as it was his eyes had fixed themselves on the arm of the chair and he had just noticed that the table at his elbow, on which still lay the contents of his pockets, was almost exactly the same height. Was there a way of escape here, he wondered. It was a hundred to one chance. . . .

But next minute he gave a sudden little gasp of fright. Dakers had caught his arm and was rolling back the sleeve. It was now or never. . . .

"This is where you go out, Rezaire," said the other harshly. "I don't like to do it. . . . No, it's no good struggling. You can't get away and you may only

hurt yourself in your last conscious minutes. . . . Drop it, I tell you!" he snapped, for Rezaire, firmly held though he was, was plunging desperately with his whole body, till even the heavy chair in which he sat rocked with his struggles.

But it was no good. His arm was now bare, his wrist tight gripped by one hand while the other advanced the needle. . . .

Then even as the point pierced the skin, but before the plunger could be pressed home the hundred to one chance came off. . . .

In thus struggling and tilting up his chair he had had but one idea,—to bring it down again so that the arm with the spring catch underneath came down upon the corner of the table. Three times it had missed; the fourth time it succeeded. The table was just the right height, it caught the chair arm before the leg came to the ground and thus the full weight of the chair came upon the catch. As if it had been a miracle Jimmie felt the bands round his arms suddenly loosen. He was free.

He sprang up. The hypodermic syringe shattered on the floor. Before the other could recover from his surprise at his victim's sudden inexplicable freedom, Jimmie had snatched up his black-jack from the table and struck him in the face.

Numbed by the pressure of the metal bands, the blow was but feeble. Dakers dodged back and grabbed for his automatic. Jimmie struck again in a sudden wild panic this time at his wrist. Luckily he hit some nerve or tendon, for the weapon clattered to the table and Dakers just had time to utter a cry of pain before Jimmie was on him again and this time stunned him with a blow on the temple.

The little man slid to the floor and Jimmie collapsed

gasping with his exertion and with sheer terror into one of the armchairs.

. . . . .

Jimmie took about a minute to pull himself together. He had been very near death indeed and he knew it. Then he gulped some whisky, possessed himself of the contents of his pockets once more and made for the door, for Piccadilly and safety.

At the threshold he stopped. Dakers still lay on the floor where he had fallen and Jimmie's courage was slowly returning. After all why should he run now when he had the room to himself? He had originally intended to investigate thoroughly the office of this so-called bookmaker; why should he not go on with it? Dakers had apparently guessed he was coming and had trapped him, but Dakers was now out of harm's way. It was not likely he would be interrupted again. If the whole thing was a blind—and Jimmie had so far seen precious little to do with racing about the place,—then it was unlikely there would be real clients or a real stenographer, despite the typewriter. . . .

He checked his thoughts abruptly and strode over to the secretary's table. The typewriter had decided him. He remembered his investigations of the Black King's letters and felt he must see a specimen from this machine. He seized a chance paper from the desk. It happened to be a yellow envelope and for lack of any ideas he was about to type his own address when he realized it might be unwise and so typed Better's address at the garage instead. Better's address had come into his mind because it possessed "t's" and "s's."

"*Mr. Alfred Better, 10, Somerset Mews, N. W. 1.*" he hammered out swiftly; then threw the envelope down with disgust. The "s's" and the "t's" were perfectly

aligned. It dashed a sudden suspicion of his that this mysterious room might perhaps be actually the headquarters of the Black King. But even if it was not there must surely be something of value in this room, hired and frequented by one of the gang. Dared he stay and search further?

He moved swiftly over to the desk again. The papers lying on it were no good he knew. But there might be a secret drawer. . . .

Jimmie's previous profession had given him great experience of secret drawers. In a few minutes one had snapped open under his clever sensitive fingers, and he gave a gasp. It was crammed with money—notes of every denomination and currency.

A smile flickered over his lips and he was just about to see whether this little cache of the Black King's could provide his £20,000 fee, when he thought the man on the floor stirred slightly.

He at once pushed the secret drawer back, ran across to Dakers and examined him. He was still unconscious, breathing stertorously and with a bruise now showing where the blow had fallen. But he might come round very soon now, thought Jimmie; time was short. The money in the secret drawer could wait till the last; there must be more important things in this room, documents which would give him more direct help in getting these blackmailers behind bars.

Swiftly he looked round the room and his eye fell again upon the safe. He had thought the key belonged to it whereas it had only belonged to the cellaret. And Dakers had taunted him with thinking it belonged to a secret hiding place. Jimmie drew in his breath sharply, as he now remembered the quick furtive look the other had thrown across the room when he said that. He was so frightened that the significance of it had been

lost on him at the time; but what had been in Dakers' mind?

He went at once to the spot where the other's glance had seemed to rest. It was one of the bookcases by the fireplace, and Jimmie smiled to himself. Bookcases were always a common disguise. Whenever a crook had anything to conceal he hid it in a bookcase. Papers, plans, jewelry, everything seemed to go into books or behind books or in false books or in safes with fronts like books. His own secret lift for example at Somerset Mansions came to mind as he set to work, sounding, tapping, investigating.

But all seemed genuine. There was not one book he could not draw out. Yet so certain was he that the man Dakers had unconsciously given away some sort of hiding place that he persevered long after it seemed hopeless to suspect anything in such an innocent bookcase.

His perseverance was not wasted. With some vague idea that the whole bookcase might be a door, for he had discovered that it was firmly attached to the wall, he began to fiddle with the carving at the side. Suddenly he heard a faint click. Some projection had moved slightly and by the sound a spring catch had been thus unlocked. Jimmie went over the surface again and soon had located a small carved rosette which was evidently the key to the trick. Then he pressed it, tugging gently meanwhile at the bookcase.

Nothing moved. Jimmie swore under his breath and tried again. Still no result. Yet he was positive he had happened on the secret of some hiding place, whether small or large.

He put his hand on one of the shelves for a moment to get a better grip and to his amazement the whole shelf, containing the twelve volumes of an Encyclopædia,

swung slowly outward. Jimmie could hardly restrain a cry of triumph. He had found it. He peered forward.

Next moment a whistle of delighted surprise left his lips. Before him was a small file cabinet built into the wall at the back of the shelf which with its books completely formed the door. A glance at one or two of the papers in the different compartments made him gasp. He realized almost with a shock that he had before him the Black King's inmost secrets, the source of all his power, the information and documents which he had collected to wring money from his victims.

A thought occurred to him and he looked under "B." In a moment he was holding a paper in his hand, the damning and conclusive evidence in black and white which had forced Sir Victor Ballarat so tamely to do the Black King's bidding and risk prison rather than go behind the bars for certain. This was indeed a find. Quickly he picked up an envelope from the desk, slipped the document inside and tucked it into his pocket. It would be invaluable to him. Through this he now held Ballarat, and through Ballarat, once the man knew the end of his chain had been transferred to other hands, Inspector Gullidge could get all the evidence he wanted to pull in the Black King himself.

Jimmie was just toying with the idea of emptying all the contents of the file cabinet into the hearth and setting a match to them, when he suddenly realized the full meaning of his discovery. The presence of the secret file cabinet proved that this imitation Commission Agent's office must after all be the Black King's real center of operations; for surely he would keep his source of income under his own eye. Confirmation of this rushed in upon him—Ballarat's constant presence at the Granada when in London; the fact that the others of the gang could visit a bookmaker's office without

arousing suspicion, the screen that apparent betting operations would give to an organizing center, even the presence of large sums of money.

Then if that were so, the so-called Commission Agent himself — Jimmie whistled aloud and his mouth fell open at the logical end to his argument. He ran to Dakers' side and peered into his face. He was remembering little odds and ends of evidence tucked away in corners of his mind. Was this at last the mysterious Black King himself? . . .

A faint clatter down the corridor which he recognized as the sound of the lift gate closing, drove every other consideration out of his mind. The newcomer might not be coming to this room at all, but he was taking no risks. He flipped the file-cabinet shut and glanced swiftly round. There was a door at the far side of the room by the window and noiselessly he made for it. It was a simple swing door without a lock and he pushed it open.

It led merely to a small windowless room tiled in white and with a basin fitted in one corner. Jimmie slipped inside at once and softly pushed the door to. If anyone did come in, they would be sure to go out for help on seeing the body on the floor and he might be able to get away unseen in the interval.

The outer door opened and he heard a sudden quick exclamation, followed by silence. Then he heard the door close again. Had the unknown gone out or was he still waiting? There was no keyhole and Jimmie could not find out. He kept silent for five minutes, at the end of which time not having heard a sound from the other room, he decided to chance it.

Softly he began to open the door, but even as he moved it a sound came to his ears which might have been either a cough or a chuckle. The unknown had

not gone out again after all. He too had merely been waiting. Or had Dakers perhaps recovered consciousness, Dakers who was the Black King himself?

Jimmie let go of the door hardly daring to breathe. Suddenly there was a little click. It sounded as if it were in the door itself. Yet he had not seen any lock. Except, he remembered now with a jump of the heart, two little copper plates inlaid in doorpost and door-edge. An electrical connection! Apprehensively he tried the door again. It did not move. He pushed it a little harder and once more heard from the other room what was this time without doubt a chuckle. Fear became certainty. The other had seen him after all and had locked him in. He was trapped.

Next instant a queer hissing sounded close at hand. Jimmie looked about in amazement for a second or two; then with a muffled cry of terror he smelt the odor of gas. Dakers' words came tumbling back into his brain: "One plan—invented by a friend of mine, is to employ ordinary gas in a sort of lethal chamber. When the—er—patient has become a corpse . . . *This* little windowless room in which he had so rashly hidden was the lethal chamber; this was the other plan for his death.

The hissing continued, the odor grew stronger. For one wild moment he beat vainly upon the door and heard again the chuckle from the other room.



HYSLOP MAKES INQUIRIES

**A**FTER reaching home Hyslop waited by the phone for some while, expecting to hear from Jimmie. Viv was in too, but was by herself in the dining-room, working on a new line that had suddenly occurred to her.

After a while the young man decided to call up Inspector Gullidge and find out if he had had any further information about the mysterious Commission Agent at the Granada.

"This bookie feller, Inspector," he began.

"What bookie?" asked Gullidge uncompromisingly.

"The laddie at the Granada."

"What man at the Granada?"

"Look here, hasn't your fellow told you?"

"What fellow?"

"Your busy, Constable Havers. The man you planted at the Granada."

"See here," interrupted the Yard man irritably. "I've got other things to do than play guessing games with you all afternoon. I have no man working on the Granada. Why should I?"

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Hyslop very earnestly, "that you didn't send a man there as a result of a squeak in the Black King case, with a view to helping Rezaire?"

"If you imagine I'm blowing my men to free feeds at swagger chop-houses just to help Rezaire, young feller-me-lad, you've got another guess coming. And anyway

I have no detective by the name of Havers. Got that? Bye-bye."

But Hyslop had hung up almost as soon as the irate Inspector. Something was very wrong indeed. For Jimmie had definitely told him that the man in the bowler hat was one of Gullidge's men, Detective Constable Havers; who had been giving him some information about the room supposed to be hired by one of the Black King's gang. Yet Gullidge had said he had no man there, knew no detective named Havers. . . .

With a sudden cry Hyslop sprang up. In a few minutes he was in a taxi speeding recklessly towards the Granada. For he had just recalled that the message brought down to him in the lounge of the Granada and purporting to come from Jimmie upstairs to tell him to go home, had been delivered by the so-called detective in the bowler hat. Jimmie had been deliberately led into a trap by the Black King's gang. And since they had purposely given away valuable information in order to make certain of him, it followed that Jimmie was indeed in great danger.

Leaving the taxi-driver with a pound note and a firm belief in miracles, Hyslop ran into the now deserted and darkened lounge of the Granada.

"I want to see the proprietor at once," he jerked out to a surprised hall-porter, dozing in that happy interval between late lunchers and early diners.

"Captain Bailey, sir?" The man was surprised. "I think he's in his office. On the first floor, sir!"

Hyslop, not waiting for the lift, was already flying up the stairs. Half-way he was forced to stand aside to allow the passage of two men in green baize aprons who were manœuvring a tall cupboard down the stairs. Next minute he was confronting the astonished proprietor in his little office.

"Captain Bailey?" he asked.

"That's me. Mr.—er . . ."

"Hyslop."

The other rose stiffly. He was a middle-aged man with the open rather stolid face and clipped moustache of the soldier. Invalided ex-officer, thought Hyslop, as he noted an artificial leg, and was delighted, for he recognized that here at least was an honest man.

"Pardon the abruptness, but I have something very important to say," he began at once. "Will you bear with my curiosity when I tell you I'm a partner in a firm of private detectives. I can produce people at Scotland Yard who will vouch for my bona fides, but at the moment there's no time."

Captain Bailey looked at the young man and decided that he had rarely met anyone less like a detective. But he liked the look of the young fellow, and from his experience of men knew he was speaking truth. So he nodded to him to continue.

"Do you know anything of a man named Samuel Dakers? He carries on the business of Commission Agent in the building somewhere on the second floor, I understand?"

The other hesitated for a moment as if doubtful whether to give the information. Then the intent earnestness of Hyslop's expression decided him.

"We have one or two rooms on the second floor which we were only too glad to be able to let out. And Mr. Dakers has one of them. But you say you're a detective—is anything serious the matter?"

"Very serious," returned Hyslop. "In fact, Captain Bailey, I believe this is a matter of life and death. Can I see this man Dakers at once?"

The ex-officer hesitated a moment. Then: "Certainly," he said. "If you don't mind my coming with

you. I'd rather have the thing on an official footing." He stumped to the door, followed eagerly by Hyslop.

In a few moments Captain Bailey was knocking at the door of Mr. Dakers' room.

No answer forthcoming, they entered. Hyslop at once made a swift survey of the place, but could find nothing of any interest. He was instantly conscious of a sense of relief. He realized he had half expected to find Jimmie's body.

He began to search the desk.

"I don't know that you ought to do that," demurred Bailey doubtfully.

"Believe me, old lad," rejoined Hyslop, "this is honestly a serious matter. . . . Ah!" he exclaimed suddenly, and out of a drawer picked a little rubber stick.

"Oh, I've seen that," put in Bailey. "He told me he keeps one there because a client once got rough."

"I can believe it," said Hyslop sweetly. "I should like to meet this bird now," he added, swinging the little black-jack by its thong.

"Better come out," ordered Bailey. "I'm afraid I really can't let you do this. You're practically beginning a search."

They went out. Hyslop's face was still grave.

"He doesn't seem to do much bookmaking," said the young man thoughtfully.

"That's what I've always felt," returned the other. "Yet he's in here a lot. He was in to-day." He was silent a moment, then added: "To tell you the truth, I've been worried about the fellow for some time. I don't think he's too honest and, as you say, he doesn't appear to be quite what he says."

"He isn't," said Hyslop, very definitely. "In fact, I wonder you have him here at all."

Captain Bailey stumped to the lift. "It's rather difficult," he admitted. "You see, though generally I'm believed to be the proprietor of the Granada, actually I'm only the managing secretary. And though I've written to the Boss about Dakers several times, his reply has always been to the effect that these rooms between Domani's suite and mine are always difficult to let and he can't afford to turn down good money. Not that the Granada isn't doing well," he added loyally.

"Who is the Boss then?"

"A big firm of solicitors to all intents, but I believe it's really some aristocrat living abroad who doesn't want to be known as a pub-keeper. But I got the job soon after I was kicked out of the service with my bit of timber and he pays me well, whoever he is."

Down in the lounge Captain Bailey spoke to a hall-porter and elicited the fact that Mr. Dakers had gone out apparently only a few minutes before Hyslop arrived.

"He said he wasn't well, sir," volunteered the man. "He told me he'd slipped on the stairs and bumped his forehead."

"Ah!" said Hyslop. Very definitely, he saw, there had been trouble. Jimmie might be hurt, or even murdered—though he refused to dwell on this possibility—he must take action at once. He pulled Bailey aside and said: "Would you mind very much if I got a detective?"

"But aren't you a . . .?"

"Yes. I mean Scotland Yard. There is more in this than you know. My partner has, I am certain, met with an accident, and when I last saw him he was going to meet this Mr. Dakers, whom he suspected of a serious crime."

"But you must have more to go on than this."

"I have. Lots more, old lad, and I think you'll soon hear something about it. See this stick." He displayed the black-jack he had taken from Dakers' room. "Apart from the fact that honest bookies, whatever the excuse, don't use these, this particular one belongs to my partner Rezaire. There's his initial. And it was in his possession an hour or two ago."

Captain Bailey's face was now serious. "In that case," he said, "you'd better phone to the Yard at once. Come up to my office and do it."

. . . . .

"Sorry to trouble you again, Inspector," began Hyslop, when he had got Gullidge on the wire, "but this business we're on is serious."

"What now? Want to tell me about more imaginary detectives you've met in restaurants?"

"No. But I'm worried about Rezaire. He's disappeared and I think they've got him. If you can see me at once I'll put you onto everything we've done so far and . . ."

"For the Lord's sake, young man," flamed the Inspector, "go home to your mother and get *her* to play with you. I tell you I'm busy."

"But . . ."

"I've just been talking to Rezaire on this very phone one minute ago."

"Great Scott! You're certain? Was he all right? What did he say?"

"Of course he was all right. And he'd got the same silly idea as you about my Constable Havers at the Granada and I tell you I'm fed-up with you both! . . . Now run away home and get out your box of bricks and your soldiers and have a jolly time with him on the nursery floor."

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## XXXII

### THE LETHAL CHAMBER

FOR once Jimmie's panic did not last long. Reason came to his aid and he ceased his futile hammering of the door to make a dive for the source of the hissing sound. At all costs he must stop the inflow of gas or he would die like a rat. Stop it or die! Stop it or die! hammered in his brain as he fumbled round the room. "Stop it or die," he reiterated with sobbing breath and fought with his fear.

He found an electric switch and light sprang up to aid him in his search. The smell of gas was getting stronger. Already he was beginning to feel faint. He would not have believed that a steady hissing sound could have been so difficult to locate. It was somewhere near the basin he at last felt certain, and he even tried the taps. A subdued pounding in his ears had now come to confuse him. He felt an unutterable longing for a gulp of clean air, free of the sickly taint of gas. . . .

It was somewhere below the basin he had now discovered. He ducked his head and listened. It was down on the floor level he was positive. He bent down further and noted with an infinite sense of relief that the air was much purer lower down; the gas was naturally rising and filling the room from the top.

He had found it. . . . A little copper plate about the size of a visiting card, set with holes. "Stop it or die! Stop it or die!" he muttered, and tried to plug it with a silk handkerchief.

But the smooth perforated surface was designed to prevent any type of plugging. Gas escaped all round,

even made its way through the silk itself. He thought of soap and for a moment raised up into the fatal layers above that were slowly dropping to envelop him.

There was no soap. The man who had planned the devilish thing had foreseen this move.

Jimmie dropped head down to floor again in despair. "Stop it or die!" he half moaned, and he could not stop it. And worse still, he now realized, even supposing he did, of what avail? He could not stop it for ever. And anyway his enemy outside was no doubt listening to the noise of the gas and would deal at once with the matter, if he thought it were being stopped.

In a sudden access of terror he rolled shrieking on the floor, fancied he could almost see the death-bearing gas hanging thick above him, could see it slowly descending to the level where lay his head in the last oxygen containing strata.

Suddenly he regained his self-control and clutched at a faint hope. His eyes on floor level had seen something. Let into the outer wall was a ventilator. Not that it was of any use, for it had been specially adapted so that the exit was right at floor level, doubtless to facilitate the exit of good air as the lighter gas pressed down upon it from above. But—and here was his last flicker of hope—just by it there showed, invisible except to anyone with his eye at ground level, a few inches of gas pipe which on its way to its exit under the basin had been led out of the wall to avoid the ventilator casing. And painted over though it was, he could see that where it had been deflected, doubtless by an amateur hand, was a little rubber joint.

Into Jimmie's quick brain there came an idea, a last daring throw for life and freedom. In his waistcoat pocket was his small pocket knife and in a second he had it out.



He struggled to retain sufficient consciousness to do what he wanted. Though lying still at full length he was sick and dizzy from breathing the tainted air. Indeed, had he been upright he would have been a dead man by now. With feeble dream-like motions he managed at length to cut through the rubber joint. Gas at once hissed out in his face, but with a quick twist he turned the cut end inwards to the ventilator opening. Gas still hissed out, but now it was escaping up the ventilator, instead of into the room. And his listening enemy could still hear the noise and would not suspect.

He labored for breath as he lay there. He was in a bad way, but hope still remained. No more gas was entering; down at floor level there was not enough to kill him, except in a very long time. But he must not lose consciousness whatever happened. He must have perfect control of himself against the moment when the door would be opened and they would drag out his body, knowing that he could not possibly be alive. . . . They would not even detect the cut in the pipe by the changed source of the hissing, for the gas would by then have been turned off. And assuming they were certain in their mind that he was dead, there might yet be a chance. . . . A small London boarding house, Dakers had said. They would have to take him across London. . . . He lay there, fighting for consciousness.

A long time had passed, sufficient to have killed him three times over, before he heard the click of the electric doorlock. He shut his eyes and tried to look dead. Hasty hands caught his ankles and hauled him, to all intents a limp corpse, out of that death chamber.

. . . . .  
At once Jimmie had to exercise the greatest self-control to avoid opening his mouth and lungs to the air,

to avoid even the appearance of breathing. With every nerve strained he waited to hear if they suspected he was not by any means dead. His greatest advantage was that he had been in the gas-filled room so long that there could be no possible doubt in the minds of his enemies. And even if they did discover, he might yet make a dash for it. . . . He would sooner jump out of the window into friendly Piccadilly than go back into that little room.

"Is he dead?" asked a voice which sounded like the man Masters.

"Heavens, no. Only unconscious." This voice was that of Dakers, and Jimmie realized at once that he intended to lie. He believed his victim really dead, but evidently did not want his subordinates to know.

"Better tie the swine up then, in case he comes round?"

"Not time now. He won't come round, I promise you. He's had the hell of a time in there and the tap on all the time. Set the fan going, the place reeks of it and we don't want an explosion."

Jimmie lay there drowsily. He heard no more talk for the men were working in silence, moving something that sounded like a heavy piece of furniture. He dared not open his eyes, but he was wondering who it had been who had actually trapped him. Not Masters, he was certain, for Masters had not an evil chuckle like that he had heard. It might have been Dakers—he could not say. He had an impression there were now three men in the room, but after five minutes or so the third man said "Ready now, sir," and he did not recognize the voice, which was apparently that of a workman.

"Clear everything out of his pockets," ordered Dakers, "except his handkerchief and a few coppers."

Jimmie for the second time in an hour felt hands

going through his pockets. He could have almost cried with disappointment as the precious envelope in which he had placed Ballarat's paper was pulled out with the rest. Not only would he lose this valuable weapon, but it would tell the Black King that he had discovered the secret of the safe behind the Encyclopædia.

"Do you want this little lot?" asked Masters, and Jimmie heard the other say: "No. I've been through 'em once. I know what they all are. Dump them on the desk! . . . Half a minute. Give me his little cosh stick. I've lost mine!"

There was a clatter as Masters tipped his possessions onto the desk and a "Thank you" from Dakers, as the black-jack was passed over. Then Jimmie was abruptly lifted by the head and feet and dumped in a wooden box. It felt like a coffin and he nearly obeyed an impulse to leap out in terror. But he restrained himself, remembering what Dakers had said about staging a gas-oven suicide in South London.

A lid was slammed and he heard a catch being fastened. But he did not care; he was free at last to take great lungfuls of air. Strong with a musty smell as of an unopened cupboard, it was yet the sweetest he had ever had.

Then he felt himself being lifted up, heard Dakers say faintly: "You know who you've got to deliver it to? Take it down the front stairs just as if you were furniture removers, through the grill-room and out at the back. The van's there. Now I must skip off at once."

Bumping and swaying followed and once a blessed pause on a staircase while someone passed, a pause which was followed inexplicably by a muttered "My God, he never looked!" from Masters. Finally he was loaded on some vehicle and the blessed friendly roar of traffic was in his ears.

By good luck the cupboard or whatever it was in which he lay was placed face upwards with the lid upwards. Freedom Jimmie felt was very near. He almost blessed Dakers for not letting Masters tie him up.

As soon as the vehicle had been moving for some time, Jimmie gathered his strength together for his final effort. With all his force he strained abruptly at the lid of his temporary prison and burst the simple catch open with a crack. The second after he was on his feet and found himself in the interior of a small tradesman's van. Masters, in old clothes and a green baize apron, was sitting on a seat opposite. There was no one else except the driver in front who had not looked round.

As Masters rose with a startled exclamation, Jimmie hit him on the chin, opened the door at the back and dropped out, to find himself near Waterloo Bridge.

Careless of the people who stared curiously at his disordered clothes and pallid face, his first action was to go into a telephone booth. He wanted to get hold of Gullidge and ask him to withdraw his man from the Granada. He had barely escaped from the Black King with his life, but now that he had he felt he could not have the police in the affair yet. Time enough when he got his £20,000 safely and had settled with the Black King in person; and now that he had put his finger on his center of operations, and had a shrewd idea who was the mysterious blackmailer himself, he did not think that moment would be far off.