

The American nodded.

"I guess I'm on," he remarked slowly; "but, if you take my advice, captain, you'll look nippy tonight. I wouldn't linger around corners admiring the mud. Things kind o' happen at corners."

TWO.

But on this particular evening the detective proved wrong. They reached Maxim's without mishap, they enjoyed an excellent dinner, during which the American showed himself to be a born conversationalist, as well as a shrewd man of the world. And over the coffee and liquors Hugh gave him a brief outline of what had taken place since he first got mixed up in the affair. The American listened in silence, though amazement shone on his face as the story proceeded. Only when Hugh had finished, and early arrivals for supper were beginning to fill the restaurant, did he sum up the matter as he saw it.

"A tough proposition, captain—d—d tough. Potts is our biggest shipping man, but where he comes on the pic-



"A Tough Proposition, Captain—D—d Tough."

ture at that moment has me beat. As for the old girl's jewels, they don't seem to fit in at all. All we can do is to put our noses inside that ledger, and see the book of the words. It'll sure help some."

And as Hugh switched off the electric light in his bedroom, having first seen that his torch was ready to hand in case of emergency, he was thinking of the detective's words. Getting hold of the ledger was not going to be easy—far from it; but the excitement of the chase had fairly obsessed him by now. He lay in bed, turning over in his mind every possible and impossible scheme by which he could get into the secret center room at The Elms. He knew the safe the ledger was kept in; but safes are awkward propositions for the ordinary mortal to tackle. Anyway, it wasn't a thing which could be done in a minute's visit; he would have to manage at least a quarter or half an hour's undisturbed search, the thought of which, with his knowledge of the habits of the household, almost made him laugh out loud. And, at that moment, a fly pinged past his head. . . .

He felt singularly wideawake, and, after a while, he gave up attempting to go to sleep. The new development which had come to light that evening was uppermost in his thoughts; and, as he lay there, covered only with a sheet, for the night was hot, the whole vile scheme unfolded itself before his imagination. The American was right in his main idea—of that he had no doubt; and in his mind's eye he saw the great crowds of idle, foolish men led by a few hot-headed visionaries and paid blackguards to their so-called Utopia. Starvation, misery, ruin, utter and complete, lurked in his mental picture; specters disguised as great ideals, but grinning sardonically under their masks. And once again he seemed to hear the toc-toc of machine-guns, as he had heard them night after night during the years gone by. But this time they were mounted on the pavement of the towns of England, and the swish of the bullets, which had swept like swarms of cock-chafers over No Man's Land, now whistled down the streets between rows of squalid houses. . . . And once again a fly pinged past his head.

With a gesture of annoyance he waved his arm. It was hot—insufferably hot, and he was beginning to regret that he had followed the earnest advice of the American to sleep with his windows shut and bolted. What on earth could Peterson do to him in a room at the Ritz? But he had promised the detective, and there it was—curtains drawn, window bolted, door locked. Moreover, and he smiled grimly to himself as he remembered it, he had even gone so far as to emulate the hysterical maiden lady of fiction and peer under the bed. . . .

The next moment the smile ceased abruptly, and he lay rigid, with every nerve alert. Something had moved in the room. . . .

It had only been a tiny movement, more like the sudden creak of a piece of furniture than anything else—but it was not quite like it. A gentle, slithering sound had preceded the creak; the sound such as a man would make who, with infinite precaution against making a noise, was moving in a dark room; a stealthy, uncanny noise. Hugh peered into the darkness tensely. After the first moment of surprise his brain was quite cool. He had looked under the bed, he had hung his coat in the cupboard, and save for those two obvious places there was no cover for a cat. And yet, with the sort of sixth sense that four years of war had given him, he knew that noise had been made by some human agency. Human! The thought of the cobra at The Elms flashed into his mind, and his mouth set more grimly. What if Peterson had introduced some of his abominable menagerie into the room? . . . Then, once more, the thing like a fly sounded loud in his ear. And, was it his imagination, or had he heard a faint sibilant hiss just before?

Suddenly it struck him that he was at a terrible disadvantage. The thing, whatever it was, knew, at any rate approximately, his position: he had not the slightest notion where it was. And a blind man boxing a man who could see, would have felt just about as safe. With Hugh, such a conclusion meant instant action. It might be dangerous on the floor; it most certainly was far more so in bed. He felt for his torch, and then, with one conclusive bound, he was standing by the door, with his hand on the electric-light switch.

Then he paused and listened intently. Not a sound could he hear; the thing, whatever it was, had become motionless at his sudden movement. For an appreciable time he stood there, his eyes searching the darkness—but even he could see nothing, and he cursed the American comprehensively under his breath. He would have given anything for even the faintest grey light, so that he could have some idea of what it was and where it was. Now he felt utterly helpless, while every moment he imagined some slimy, crawling brute touching his bare feet—creeping up on him. . . . He pulled himself together sharply. Light was essential, and at once. But, if he switched it on, there would be a moment when the thing would see him before he could see the thing—and such moments are not helpful. There only remained his torch; and on the Ancre, on one occasion, he had saved his life by its judicious use. The man behind one of those useful implements is in blackness far more impenetrable than the blackest night, for the man in front is dazzled. He can only shoot at the torch: wherefore hold it to one side and in front of you. . . .

The light flashed out, darting round the room. Ping! Something hit the sleeve of his pajamas, but still he could see nothing. The bed, with the clothes thrown back; the washstand; the chair with his trousers and shirt—everything was as it had been when he turned in. And then he heard a second sound—distinct and clear. It came from high up, near the ceiling, and the beam caught the big cupboard and traveled up. It reached the top, and rested there, fixed and steady. Framed in the middle of it, peering over the edge, was a little hairless, brown face, holding what looked like a tube in its mouth. Hugh had one glimpse of a dark, skinny hand putting something in the tube, and then he switched off the torch and ducked, just as another fly pinged over his head and hit the wall behind.

One thing, at any rate, was certain: the other occupant of the room was human, and with that realization all his nerve returned. There would be time enough later on to find out how he got there, and what those strange pinging noises had been caused by. Just at that moment only one thing was on the program; and without a sound he crept round the bed toward the cupboard, to put that one thing into effect in his usual direct manner.

Twice did he hear the little whistling hiss from above, but nothing sang past his head. Evidently the man had lost him, and was probably still aiming at the door. And then, with hands that barely touched it, he felt the outlines of the cupboard.

It was standing an inch or two from the wall, and he slipped his fingers behind the back on one side. He listened for a moment, but no movement came from above; then, half facing the wall, he put one leg against it. There was one quick, tremendous heave: a crash which sounded deafening: then silence. And once again he switched on his torch. . . .

Lying on the floor by the window was one of the smallest men he had ever seen. He was a native of sorts, and Hugh turned him over with his foot. He was quite unconscious, and the bump on his head, where it had hit the floor, was rapidly swelling to the size of a large orange. In his hand he still clutched the little tube, and Hugh gingerly removed it. Placed in position at one end was a long splinter of wood, with a sharpened point: and by the light of his torch Hugh saw that it was faintly discolored with some brown stain.

He was still examining it with interest, when a thunderous knock came on the door. He strolled over and switched on the electric light; then he opened the door.

An excited night-porter rushed in, followed by two or three other people in varying stages of undress, and stopped in amazement at the scene. The heavy cupboard, with a great crack across the back, lay face downward on the floor; the native still lay curled up and motionless.

"One of the hotel pets?" queried Hugh pleasantly, lighting a cigarette. "If it's all the same to you, I wish



"If It's All the Same to You, I Wish You'd Remove Him."

you'd remove him. He was—ah—finding it uncomfortable on the top of the cupboard."

It appeared that the night-porter could speak English; it also appeared that the lady occupying the room below had rushed forth demanding to be led to the basement, under the misapprehension that war had again been declared and the Germans were bombing Paris. And then, to crown everything, while the uproar was at its height, the native on the floor, opening one beady and somewhat dazed eye, realized that things looked unhealthy. Unnoticed, he lay "doggo" for a while; then, like a rabbit which has almost been trodden on, he dodged between the legs of the men in the room, and vanished through the open door. Taken by surprise, for a moment no one moved: then, simultaneously, they dashed into the passage. It was empty, and Hugh, glancing up, saw the American detective advancing toward them along the corridor.

"What's the trouble, captain?" he asked as he joined the group.

"A friend of the management elected to spend the night on the top of my cupboard, Mr. Green," answered Drummond, "and got cramp half-way through."

The American gazed at the wreckage in silence. Then he looked at Hugh, and what he saw on that worthy's face apparently decided him to maintain that policy. In fact, it was not till the night-porter and his attendant minions had at last, and very dubiously, withdrawn, that he again opened his mouth.

"Looks like a hectic night," he murmured. "What happened?" Briefly Hugh told him what had occurred and the detective whistled softly.

"Blowpipe and poisoned darts," he said shortly, returning the tube to Drummond. "Narrow escape—d—d narrow! Look at your pillow."

Hugh looked: embedded in the linen were four pointed splinters similar to the one he held in his hand; by the door were three more, lying on the floor.

"An engaging little bird," he laughed; "but nasty to look at."

He extracted the little pieces of wood and carefully placed them in an empty match-box: the tube he put into his cigarette-case.

"Might come in handy: you never know," he remarked casually.

"They might if you stand quite still," said the American, with a sudden, sharp command in his voice. "Don't move."

Hugh stood motionless, staring at the speaker, who with eyes fixed on his right forearm, had stepped forward. From the loose sleeve of his pajama coat the detective gently pulled another dart and dropped it into the match-box.

"Not far off getting you that time, captain," he cried cheerfully. "Now you've got the whole blamed outfit."

THREE

It was the Comte de Guy who boarded the boat express at the Gare du Nord the next day; it was Carl Peterson who stepped off the boat express at Boulogne. And it was only Drummond's positive assurance which convinced the American that the two characters were the same man.

He was leaning over the side of the boat reading a telegram when he first saw Hugh ten minutes after the boat had left the harbor; and if he had hoped for a different result to the incident of the night before, no sign of it showed on his face. Instead he waved a cheerful greeting to Drummond.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he remarked affably. "Have you been to Paris, too?"

For a moment Drummond looked at him narrowly. Was it a stupid bluff, or was the man so sure of his power of disguise that he assumed with certainty he had not been recognized? And it suddenly struck Hugh that, save for that one tell-tale habit—a habit which, in all probability, Peterson himself was unconscious of—he would not have recognized him.

"Yes," he answered lightly. "I came over to see how you behaved yourself!"

"What a pity I didn't know!" said Peterson, with a good-humored chuckle. He seemed in excellent spirits, as he carefully tore the telegram into tiny pieces and dropped them overboard. "We might have had another of our homely little chats over some supper. Where did you stay?"

"At the Ritz. And you?"

"I always stop at the Bristol," answered Peterson. "Quieter than the Ritz, I think."

FOUR

"Walk right in, Mr. Green," said Hugh, as, three hours later, they got out of a taxi in Half Moon street. "This is my little rabbit-hutch."

He followed the American up the stairs, and produced his latchkey. But before he could even insert it in the hole the door was flung open, and Peter Darrell stood facing him with evident relief in his face.

"Thank the Lord you've come, old son," he cried, with a brief look at the detective. "There's something doing down at Godalming I don't like."

He followed Hugh into the sitting room.

"At twelve o'clock today Toby rang up. He was talking quite ordinarily—you know the sort of rot he usually gets off his chest—when suddenly he stopped quite short and said, 'My God! What do you want?' I could tell he'd looked up, because his voice was muffled. Then there was the sound of a scuffle, I heard Toby curse, then nothing more. I rang and rang and rang—no answer."

"What did you do?" Drummond, with a letter in his hand which he had taken off the mantelpiece, was listening grimly.

"Algy was here. He motored straight off to see if he could find out what was wrong. I stopped here to tell you."

"Anything through from him?"

"Not a word. There's foul play, or I'll eat my hat."

But Hugh did not answer. With a look on his face which even Peter had never seen before, he was reading the letter. It was short and to the point, but he read it three times before he spoke.

"When did this come?" he asked.

"An hour ago," answered the other. "I very nearly opened it."

"Read it," said Hugh. He handed it to Peter and went to the door.

"Denny," he shouted, "I want my car round at once." Then he came back into the room. "If they've hurt one hair of her head," he said, his voice full of a smoldering fury, "I'll murder that gang one by one with my bare hands."

"Say, captain, may I see this letter?" said the American; and Hugh nodded.

"'For pity's sake, come at once,'" read the detective aloud. "'The bearer of this is trustworthy.'" He thoughtfully picked his teeth. "Girl's writing. Do you know her?"

"My fiancee," said Hugh shortly.

"Certain?" snapped the American.

"Certain!" cried Hugh. "Of course I am. I know every curl of every letter."

"There is such a thing as forgery," remarked the detective dispassionately.

"D—n it, man," exploded Hugh; "do you imagine I don't know my own girl's writing?"

"A good many bank cashiers have mistaken their customers' writing before now," said the other, unmoved. "I don't like it, captain. A girl in real trouble wouldn't put in that bit about the bearer."

"You go to h—l," remarked Hugh briefly. "I'm going to Godalming."

"Well," drawled the American, "not knowing Godalming, I don't know who scores. But, if you go there—I come too."

"And me," said Peter, brightening up.

Hugh grinned.

"Not you, old son. If Mr. Green will come, I'll be delighted; but I want you here at headquarters."

He turned round as his servant put his head in at the door.

"Car here, sir. Do you want a bag packed?"

"No—only my revolver. Are you ready, Mr. Green?"

"Sure thing," said the American. "I always am."

"Then we'll move." And Peter, watching the car resignedly from the window, saw the American grip his seat with both hands, and then raise them suddenly in silent prayer, while an elderly lady fled with a scream to the safety of the area below.

They did the trip in well under the hour, and the detective got out of the car with a faint sigh of relief.

Drummond dodged rapidly through the bushes on his way to The Larches; and when the American finally overtook him, he was standing by a side-door knocking hard on the panels.

"Seems kind of empty," said the detective thoughtfully, as the minutes went by and no one came. "Why not try the front door?"

"Because it's in sight of the other house," said Hugh briefly. "I'm going to break in."

He retreated a yard from the door, then, bracing his shoulder, he charged it once. And the door, as a door, was not. . . . Rapidly the two men went from room to room—bedrooms, servants' quarters, even the bathroom. Everyone was empty: not a sound could be heard in the house. Finally, only the dining room remained, and as they stood by the door looking round, the American shifted his chewing gum to a new point of vantage.

"Somebody has been rough-housing by the look of things," he remarked judicially. "Looks like a bdozing den after a thick night."

"It does," remarked Hugh grimly, taking in the disorder of the room. The tablecloth was pulled off, the telephone lay on the floor. China and glass, smashed to pieces, littered the carpet; but what caught his eye, and caused him suddenly to step forward and pick it up, was a plain circle of glass with a black cord attached to it through a small hole.

"Algy Longworth's eyeglass," he muttered. "So he's been caught too."

And it was at that moment that, clear and distinct through the still evening air, they heard a woman's agonized scream. It came from the house next door, and then Drummond darted forward.

"Stop, you young fool," the American shouted, but he was too late.

He watched Drummond, running like a stag, cross the lawn and disappear in the trees. For a second he hesitated; then, with a shrug of square shoulders, he rapidly left the house by the way they had entered. And a few minutes later, Drummond's car was skimming back toward London, with a grim-faced man at the wheel.

And the owner of the car was lying in blissful unconsciousness in the hall of The Elms, surrounded by a half a dozen men.

CHAPTER X

In Which the Hun Nation Decreases by One.

ONE

Drummond had yielded to impulse—the blind, all-powerful impulse of any man who is a man to get to the woman he loves if she wants him. As he had dashed across the lawn to The Elms, with the American's warning cry echoing in his ears, he had been incapable of serious thought. Subconsciously he had known that, from every point of view, it was the act of a madman, that he was deliberately putting his head into what, in all probability, was a carefully prepared noose; that, from every point of view, he could help Phyllis better by remaining a free agent outside. But when a girl shrieks, and the man who loves her hears it, arguments begin to look tired. And what little caution might have remained to Hugh completely vanished as he saw the girl watching him with agonized terror in her face, from an upstair window, as he dashed up to the house. It was only for a brief second that he saw her; then she disappeared suddenly, as if snatched away by some invisible person.

"I'm coming, darling." He had given one wild shout, and hurled himself through the door which led into the house from the garden. A dazzling light of intense brilliance had shone in his face, momentarily blinding him; then had come a crushing blow on the back of his head. One groping, wild step forward, and Hugh Drummond, dimly conscious of men all round him, had pitched forward on his face into utter oblivion.

"It's too easy." Lakington's sneering voice broke the silence, as he looked vindictively at the unconscious man.

"So you have thought before, Henry," chuckled Peterson. "And he always bobs up somehow. If you take my advice you'll finish him off here and now, and run no further risks."

"Kill him while he's unconscious?" Lakington laughed evilly. "No, Carl, not under any circumstances whatever. He has quite a lengthy score to pay, and by God! he's going to pay it this time." He stepped forward and kicked Drummond twice in the ribs with a cold, animal fury.

"Well, don't kick him when he's down, guv'nor. You'll 'ave plenty o' time after." A hoarse voice from the circle of men made Lakington look up.

"You cut it out, Jem Smith," he snarled, "or I might find plenty of time after for others beside this young swine." The ex-pugilist muttered uneasily under his breath, but said no more, and it was Peterson who broke the silence.

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Lash him up like the other two," returned Lakington, "and leave him to cool until I get back tomorrow. But I'll bring him round before I go, and just talk to him for a little. I wouldn't like him not to know what was going to happen to him. Anticipation is always delightful." He turned to two of the men standing near. "Carry him into my room," he ordered, "and another of you get the rope."

And so it was that Algy Longworth and Toby Sinclair, with black rage and fury in their hearts, watched the limp form of their leader being carried into the central room. Swathed in rope, they sat motionless and impotent, in their respective chairs, while they watched the same process being performed on Drummond. He was no amateur at the game, was the rope-winder, and by the time he had finished, Hugh resembled nothing so much as a lifeless brown mummy. Only his head was free, and that lolled forward helplessly.

Lakington watched the performance for a time; then, wearying of it, he strolled over to Algy's chair.

"Well, you puppy," he remarked, "are you going to try shouting again?" He picked up the rhinoceros-hide riding-whip lying on the floor, and bent it between his hands. "That wale on your face greatly improves your beauty, and next time you'll get two, and a gag as well."

"How's the jaw, you horrible bit of dreg?" remarked Algy insultingly, and Toby laughed.

"Don't shake his nerve, Algy," he implored. "For the first time in his filthy life he feels safe in the same room as Hugh."

The taunt seemed to madden Lakington, who sprang across the room and lashed Sinclair over the face. But even after the sixth cut no sound came from the helpless man, though the blood was streaming down inside his collar. His eyes, calm and sneering, met those of the raving man in front of him without a quiver, and, at last, Peterson himself intervened.

"Stop it, Lakington." His voice was stern as he caught the other's upraised arm. "That's enough for the time."

For a moment it seemed as if Lakington would have struck Peterson himself; then he controlled himself, and, with an ugly laugh, flung the whip into a corner.

(To Be Continued.)

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