

CHAPTER XXIV. JULIUS TAKES A HAND

IN his suite at Claridge's, Kramenin reclined on a couch and dictated to his secretary in sibilant Russian.

Presently the telephone at the secretary's elbow purred, and he took up the receiver, spoke for a minute or two, then turned to his employer.

"Some one below is asking for you."

"Who is it?"

"He gives the name of Mr. Julius P. Hersheimer."

"Hersheimer," repeated Kramenin thoughtfully. "I have heard that name before."

"His father was one of the steel kings of America," explained the secretary, whose business it was to know everything. "This young man must be a millionaire several times over."

The other's eyes narrowed appreciatively.

"You had better go down and see him, Ivan. Find out what he wants."

The secretary obeyed, closing the door noiselessly behind him. In a few minutes he returned.

"He declines to state his business--says it is entirely private and personal, and that he must see you."

"A millionaire several times over," murmured Kramenin. "Bring him up, my dear Ivan."

The secretary left the room once more, and returned escorting Julius.

"Monsieur Kramenin?" said the latter abruptly.

The Russian, studying him attentively with his pale venomous eyes, bowed.

"Pleased to meet you," said the American. "I've got some very important business

I'd like to talk over with you, if I can see you alone." He looked pointedly at the other.

"My secretary, Monsieur Griebler, from whom I have no secrets."

"That may be so--but I have," said Julius dryly. "So I'd be obliged if you'd tell him to scoot."

"Ivan," said the Russian softly, "perhaps you would not mind retiring into the next room----"

"The next room won't do," interrupted Julius. "I know these ducal suites--and I want this one plumb empty except for you and me. Send him round to a store to buy a penn'orth of peanuts."

Though not particularly enjoying the American's free and easy manner of speech, Kramenin was devoured by curiosity. "Will your business take long to state?"

"Might be an all night job if you caught on."

"Very good, Ivan. I shall not require you again this evening. Go to the theatre--take a night off."

"Thank you, your excellency."

The secretary bowed and departed.

Julius stood at the door watching his retreat. Finally, with a satisfied sigh, he closed it, and came back to his position in the centre of the room.

"Now, Mr. Hersheimer, perhaps you will be so kind as to come to the point?"

"I guess that won't take a minute," drawled Julius. Then, with an abrupt change of manner: "Hands up--or I shoot!"

For a moment Kramenin stared blindly into the big automatic, then, with almost comical haste, he flung up his hands above his head. In that instant Julius had taken his measure. The man he had to deal with was an abject physical coward--the rest would be easy.

"This is an outrage," cried the Russian in a high hysterical voice. "An outrage! Do you mean to kill me?"

"Not if you keep your voice down. Don't go edging sideways towards that bell. That's better."

"What do you want? Do nothing rashly. Remember my life is of the utmost value to my country. I may have been maligned----"

"I reckon," said Julius, "that the man who let daylight into you would be doing humanity a good turn. But you needn't worry any. I'm not proposing to kill you this trip--that is, if you're reasonable."

The Russian quailed before the stern menace in the other's eyes. He passed his tongue over his dry lips.

"What do you want? Money?"

"No. I want Jane Finn."

"Jane Finn? I--never heard of her!"

"You're a darned liar! You know perfectly who I mean."

"I tell you I've never heard of the girl."

"And I tell you," retorted Julius, "that Little Willie here is just hopping mad to go off!"

The Russian wilted visibly.

"You wouldn't dare----"

"Oh, yes, I would, son!"

Kramenin must have recognized something in the voice that carried conviction, for he said sullenly:

"Well? Granted I do know who you mean--what of it?"

"You will tell me now--right here--where she is to be found."

Kramenin shook his head.

"I daren't."

"Why not?"

"I daren't. You ask an impossibility."

"Afraid, eh? Of whom? Mr. Brown? Ah, that tickles you up! There is such a person, then? I doubted it. And the mere mention of him scares you stiff!"

"I have seen him," said the Russian slowly. "Spoken to him face to face. I did not know it until afterwards. He was one of a crowd. I should not know him again. Who is he really? I do not know. But I know this--he is a man to fear."

"He'll never know," said Julius.

"He knows everything--and his vengeance is swift. Even I--Kramenin!--would not be exempt!"

"Then you won't do as I ask you?"

"You ask an impossibility."

"Sure that's a pity for you," said Julius cheerfully. "But the world in general will benefit." He raised the revolver.

"Stop," shrieked the Russian. "You cannot mean to shoot me?"

"Of course I do. I've always heard you Revolutionists held life cheap, but it seems there's a difference when it's your own life in question. I gave you just one chance of saving your dirty skin, and that you wouldn't take!"

"They would kill me!"

"Well," said Julius pleasantly, "it's up to you. But I'll just say this. Little Willie here is a dead cert, and if I was you I'd take a sporting chance with Mr. Brown!"

"You will hang if you shoot me," muttered the Russian irresolutely.

"No, stranger, that's where you're wrong. You forget the dollars. A big crowd of solicitors will get busy, and they'll get some high-brow doctors on the job, and the end of it all will be that they'll say my brain was unhinged. I shall spend a few months in a quiet sanatorium, my mental health will improve, the doctors will

declare me sane again, and all will end happily for little Julius. I guess I can bear a few months' retirement in order to rid the world of you, but don't you kid yourself I'll hang for it!"

The Russian believed him. Corrupt himself, he believed implicitly in the power of money. He had read of American murder trials running much on the lines indicated by Julius. He had bought and sold justice himself. This virile young American, with the significant drawling voice, had the whip hand of him.

"I'm going to count five," continued Julius, "and I guess, if you let me get past four, you needn't worry any about Mr. Brown. Maybe he'll send some flowers to the funeral, but YOU won't smell them! Are you ready? I'll begin. One--two three--four----"

The Russian interrupted with a shriek:

"Do not shoot. I will do all you wish."

Julius lowered the revolver.

"I thought you'd hear sense. Where is the girl?"

"At Gatehouse, in Kent. Astley Priors, the place is called."

"Is she a prisoner there?"

"She's not allowed to leave the house--though it's safe enough really. The little fool has lost her memory, curse her!"

"That's been annoying for you and your friends, I reckon. What about the other girl, the one you decoyed away over a week ago?"

"She's there too," said the Russian sullenly.

"That's good," said Julius. "Isn't it all panning out beautifully? And a lovely night for the run!"

"What run?" demanded Kramenin, with a stare.

"Down to Gatehouse, sure. I hope you're fond of motoring?"

"What do you mean? I refuse to go."

"Now don't get mad. You must see I'm not such a kid as to leave you here. You'd ring up your friends on that telephone first thing! Ah!" He observed the fall on the other's face. "You see, you'd got it all fixed. No, sir, you're coming along with me. This your bedroom next door here? Walk right in. Little Willie and I will come behind. Put on a thick coat, that's right. Fur lined? And you a Socialist! Now we're ready. We walk downstairs and out through the hall to where my car's waiting. And don't you forget I've got you covered every inch of the way. I can shoot just as well through my coat pocket. One word, or a glance even, at one of those liveried menials, and there'll sure be a strange face in the Sulphur and Brimstone Works!"

Together they descended the stairs, and passed out to the waiting car. The Russian was shaking with rage. The hotel servants surrounded them. A cry hovered on his lips, but at the last minute his nerve failed him. The American was a man of his word.

When they reached the car, Julius breathed a sigh of relief. The danger-zone was passed. Fear had successfully hypnotized the man by his side.

"Get in," he ordered. Then as he caught the other's sidelong glance, "No, the chauffeur won't help you any. Naval man. Was on a submarine in Russia when the Revolution broke out. A brother of his was murdered by your people. George!"

"Yes, sir?" The chauffeur turned his head.

"This gentleman is a Russian Bolshevik. We don't want to shoot him, but it may be necessary. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"I want to go to Gatehouse in Kent. Know the road at all?"

"Yes, sir, it will be about an hour and a half's run."

"Make it an hour. I'm in a hurry."

"I'll do my best, sir." The car shot forward through the traffic.

Julius ensconced himself comfortably by the side of his victim. He kept his hand in the pocket of his coat, but his manner was urbane to the last degree.

"There was a man I shot once in Arizona----" he began cheerfully.

At the end of the hour's run the unfortunate Kramenin was more dead than alive. In succession to the anecdote of the Arizona man, there had been a tough from 'Frisco, and an episode in the Rockies. Julius's narrative style, if not strictly accurate, was picturesque!

Slowing down, the chauffeur called over his shoulder that they were just coming into Gatehouse. Julius bade the Russian direct them. His plan was to drive straight up to the house. There Kramenin was to ask for the two girls. Julius explained to him that Little Willie would not be tolerant of failure. Kramenin, by this time, was as putty in the other's hands. The terrific pace they had come had still further unmanned him. He had given himself up for dead at every corner.

The car swept up the drive, and stopped before the porch. The chauffeur looked round for orders.

"Turn the car first, George. Then ring the bell, and get back to your place. Keep the engine going, and be ready to scoot like hell when I give the word."

"Very good, sir."

The front door was opened by the butler. Kramenin felt the muzzle of the revolver pressed against his ribs.

"Now," hissed Julius. "And be careful."

The Russian beckoned. His lips were white, and his voice was not very steady:

"It is I--Kramenin! Bring down the girl at once! There is no time to lose!"

Whittington had come down the steps. He uttered an exclamation of astonishment at seeing the other.

"You! What's up? Surely you know the plan----"

Kramenin interrupted him, using the words that have created many unnecessary panics:

"We have been betrayed! Plans must be abandoned. We must save our own skins. The girl! And at once! It's our only chance."

Whittington hesitated, but for hardly a moment.

"You have orders--from HIM?"

"Naturally! Should I be here otherwise? Hurry! There is no time to be lost. The other little fool had better come too."

Whittington turned and ran back into the house. The agonizing minutes went by. Then--two figures hastily huddled in cloaks appeared on the steps and were hustled into the car. The smaller of the two was inclined to resist and Whittington shoved her in unceremoniously. Julius leaned forward, and in doing so the light from the open door lit up his face. Another man on the steps behind Whittington gave a startled exclamation. Concealment was at an end.

"Get a move on, George," shouted Julius.

The chauffeur slipped in his clutch, and with a bound the car started.

The man on the steps uttered an oath. His hand went to his pocket. There was a flash and a report. The bullet just missed the taller girl by an inch.

"Get down, Jane," cried Julius. "Flat on the bottom of the car." He thrust her sharply forward, then standing up, he took careful aim and fired.

"Have you hit him?" cried Tuppence eagerly.

"Sure," replied Julius. "He isn't killed, though. Skunks like that take a lot of killing. Are you all right, Tuppence?"

"Of course I am. Where's Tommy? And who's this?" She indicated the shivering Kramenin.

"Tommy's making tracks for the Argentine. I guess he thought you'd turned up your toes. Steady through the gate, George! That's right. It'll take 'em at least five minutes to get busy after us. They'll use the telephone, I guess, so look out for snares ahead--and don't take the direct route. Who's this, did you say, Tuppence? Let me present Monsieur Kramenin. I persuaded him to come on the trip for his health."

The Russian remained mute, still livid with terror.

"But what made them let us go?" demanded Tuppence suspiciously.

"I reckon Monsieur Kramenin here asked them so prettily they just couldn't refuse!"

This was too much for the Russian. He burst out vehemently:

"Curse you--curse you! They know now that I betrayed them. My life won't be safe for an hour in this country."

"That's so," assented Julius. "I'd advise you to make tracks for Russia right away."

"Let me go, then," cried the other. "I have done what you asked. Why do you still keep me with you?"

"Not for the pleasure of your company. I guess you can get right off now if you want to. I thought you'd rather I tooled you back to London."

"You may never reach London," snarled the other. "Let me go here and now."

"Sure thing. Pull up, George. The gentleman's not making the return trip. If I ever come to Russia, Monsieur Kramenin, I shall expect a rousing welcome, and----"

But before Julius had finished his speech, and before the car had finally halted, the Russian had swung himself out and disappeared into the night.

"Just a mite impatient to leave us," commented Julius, as the car gathered way again. "And no idea of saying good-bye politely to the ladies. Say, Jane, you can get up on the seat now."

For the first time the girl spoke.

"How did you 'persuade' him?" she asked.

Julius tapped his revolver.

"Little Willie here takes the credit!"

"Splendid!" cried the girl. The colour surged into her face, her eyes looked admiringly at Julius.

"Annette and I didn't know what was going to happen to us," said Tuppence. "Old

Whittington hurried us off. We thought it was lambs to the slaughter."

"Annette," said Julius. "Is that what you call her?"

His mind seemed to be trying to adjust itself to a new idea.

"It's her name," said Tuppence, opening her eyes very wide.

"Shucks!" retorted Julius. "She may think it's her name, because her memory's gone, poor kid. But it's the one real and original Jane Finn we've got here."

"What?" cried Tuppence.

But she was interrupted. With an angry spurt, a bullet embedded itself in the upholstery of the car just behind her head.

"Down with you," cried Julius. "It's an ambush. These guys have got busy pretty quickly. Push her a bit, George."

The car fairly leapt forward. Three more shots rang out, but went happily wide. Julius, upright, leant over the back of the car.

"Nothing to shoot at," he announced gloomily. "But I guess there'll be another little picnic soon. Ah!"

He raised his hand to his cheek.

"You are hurt?" said Annette quickly.

"Only a scratch."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"Let me out! Let me out, I say! Stop the car. It is me they're after. I'm the one they want. You shall not lose your lives because of me. Let me go." She was fumbling with the fastenings of the door.

Julius took her by both arms, and looked at her. She had spoken with no trace of foreign accent.

"Sit down, kid," he said gently. "I guess there's nothing wrong with your memory. Been fooling them all the time, eh?"

The girl looked at him, nodded, and then suddenly burst into tears. Julius patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there--just you sit tight. We're not going to let you quit."

Through her sobs the girl said indistinctly:

"You're from home. I can tell by your voice. It makes me home-sick."

"Sure I'm from home. I'm your cousin--Julius Hersheimer. I came over to Europe on purpose to find you--and a pretty dance you've led me."

The car slackened speed. George spoke over his shoulder:

"Cross-roads here, sir. I'm not sure of the way."

The car slowed down till it hardly moved. As it did so a figure climbed suddenly over the back, and plunged head first into the midst of them.

"Sorry," said Tommy, extricating himself.

A mass of confused exclamations greeted him. He replied to them severally:

"Was in the bushes by the drive. Hung on behind. Couldn't let you know before at the pace you were going. It was all I could do to hang on. Now then, you girls, get out!"

"Get out?"

"Yes. There's a station just up that road. Train due in three minutes. You'll catch it if you hurry."

"What the devil are you driving at?" demanded Julius. "Do you think you can fool them by leaving the car?"

"You and I aren't going to leave the car. Only the girls."

"You're crazed, Beresford. Stark staring mad! You can't let those girls go off alone. It'll be the end of it if you do."

Tommy turned to Tuppence.

"Get out at once, Tuppence. Take her with you, and do just as I say. No one will do you any harm. You're safe. Take the train to London. Go straight to Sir James Peel Edgerton. Mr. Carter lives out of town, but you'll be safe with him."

"Darn you!" cried Julius. "You're mad. Jane, you stay where you are."

With a sudden swift movement, Tommy snatched the revolver from Julius's hand, and levelled it at him.

"Now will you believe I'm in earnest? Get out, both of you, and do as I say--or I'll shoot!"

Tuppence sprang out, dragging the unwilling Jane after her.

"Come on, it's all right. If Tommy's sure--he's sure. Be quick. We'll miss the train."

They started running.

Julius's pent-up rage burst forth.

"What the hell----"

Tommy interrupted him.

"Dry up! I want a few words with you, Mr. Julius Hersheimer."