CHAPTER X

IN WHICH HUGH DRUMMOND MAKES A DISCOVERY

The prospect in front of Count Zadowa alias Mr. Atkinson was not a very alluring one, and the more he thought about it the less he liked it. Either the diamonds were blown to dust, or they were in the hands of the authorities. In the first event he had the Reverend Theodosius to reckon with; in the second the police. And for preference the police won in a canter.

He was under no delusions was the hunchback. This mysterious man who signed all his communications by the enigmatic letter X, and whose real appearance was known probably only to the girl who was his constant companion, so wonderful and varied were his disguises, was not a person whom it paid to have any delusions about. He paid magnificently, even lavishly, for work well done: for failure he took no excuse. Even long association did not mitigate the offence. With a shudder Count Zadowa remembered: the fate of certain men he had known in the past, men who had been employed, even as he was now employed, on one of the innumerable schemes of their chief. No project, from the restoration of a monarchy to the downfall of a business combine, was too great for the man who
now called himself the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor. All that mattered was that there should be money in it. Why he should be interesting himself in the spread of Communism in England it was not for Count Zadowa to inquire, even though he was the head of that particular activity. Presumably he was being paid for it by others; it was no business of Count Zadowa's.

And as he undressed that night in the quiet hotel in Bloomsbury where he lived the hunch-back cursed bitterly under his breath. It was such a cruel stroke of luck. How much he had dreaded that first interview with his chief he had hardly admitted even to himself. And then had come the heaven-sent opportunity of killing the leader of the Black Gang in perfect safety; of making it appear that the three men inside the room, and who had no business to be inside the room, had blown themselves up by mistake. How was he to know about the diamonds: how could he possibly be expected to know? And once again he cursed, while the sweat glistened on his forehead as he realised his predicament.

He had already decided that his only method lay in going down to the office next morning as usual. He would find it, of course, in the possession of the police, and would be told what had happened. And then he would have to trust to luck to discover what he could. Perhaps—and at the thought of it he almost started to dress again—perhaps the desk was not utterly ruined. Perhaps the diamonds were there, even now, in the secret drawer.
And then he realised that if he went to his office at two o’clock in the morning, it must look suspicious. No; waiting was the only possibility, and Count Zadowa waited. He even went so far as to get into bed, but Count Zadowa did not sleep.

Punctually at half-past nine the next morning he arrived at 5, Green Street. As he had expected, a constable was standing at the door.

“Who are you, sir?” The policeman was barring his entrance.

“My name is Atkinson,” said the Count, with well-feigned surprise. “May I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Haven’t you heard, sir?” said the constable. “There was a bomb outrage here last night. In your office upstairs.”

“A bomb outrage?” Mr. Atkinson gazed at the constable in amazement, and a loafer standing by began to laugh.

“Not ’arf, guv’nor,” he remarked cheerfully. “The ’ole ruddy place is gone to blazes.”

“You dry up,” admonished the policeman. “Move along, can’t you?”

“Orl rite, orl rite,” grumbled the other, shambling off. “Not allowed to live soon, we won’t be.”

“You’d better go up, sir,” continued the constable. “The Inspector is upstairs.”

Mr. Atkinson needed no second invitation. Taking no notice of the half-dozen clerks who had gathered in a little group discussing the affair, he passed along the passage into his own room. And the scene that met his eyes reflected credit on the manufacturer of the
bomb. Viewed by the light of day which came streaming in through the great hole in the wall the ruin was complete. In the centre—and it was there Mr. Atkinson’s eyes strayed continuously even while he was acknowledging the greetings of the Inspector—stood the remnants of the desk. And as he looked at it any faint hope he may have cherished vanished completely. It was literally split to pieces in every direction; there was not left a hiding-place for a pea, much less a bag of diamonds.

“Not much in the office, sir, which was lucky for you.”

The Inspector was speaking and Mr. Atkinson pulled himself together. He had a part to play, and whatever happened no suspicions must be aroused.

“I feel quite staggered, Inspector.” His glance travelled to a sinister-looking heap in the corner—a heap roughly covered with an old rug. The wall above it was stained a dull red, and from under the rug stretched out two long streams of the same colour—streams which were not yet dry.

“What on earth has happened?”

“There seems very little doubt about that, sir,” remarked the Inspector. “I have reconstructed the whole thing with the help of your clerk here, Mr. Cohen. It appears that last night about twelve o’clock three men entered your office downstairs. They bound and gagged Cohen—and then they came on up here. Evidently their idea was burglary. What happened, then, of course, it is hard to say exactly. Presumably they started using explosive to
force your safe, and explosive is funny stuff even for the expert."

The Inspector waved a hand at the heap in the corner.

"And he—poor devil, was quite an expert in his way. One of the three men, Mr. Atkinson—or what’s left of him, Ginger Martin—an old friend of mine."

For a moment Mr. Atkinson’s heart stood still. One of the three men! Then, where in Heaven’s name, were the other two?

"One of the three, Inspector," he said at length, steadying his voice. "But what happened to the others?"

"That is the amazing thing, sir," answered the Inspector. "I can but think that though three men entered the office downstairs, only Martin can have been in here at the time of the explosion." He pulled back the blood-stained rug, and with a shudder Mr. Atkinson contemplated what was underneath. He recognised the face; sure enough it was the man who had run round the room when he found himself trapped. But there was no trace of anyone else. The mangled remnants had formed one man and one man only. Then what, he reflected again,—what had become of the other two? He knew they had been in there at the time of the explosion, and as he vaguely listened to the Inspector’s voice his mind was busy with this new development.

They had been in there—the leader of the Black Gang and one of his pals. There was no trace of them now. Wherefore, somehow, by some miraculous means they must have
escaped, and the soul of Count Zadowa grew sick within him. Not only had the whole thing been useless and unnecessary; not only had he incurred the wrath of his own leader, and unwelcome attention from the police, but, in addition, this mysterious being whom he had thought to kill was not dead but very much alive. He had two people up against him now, and he wasn’t quite sure which of the two he feared most.

Suddenly he became aware that the Inspector was asking him a question.

"Why, yes," he said, pulling himself together, "that is so. I was leaving this office here, and had removed almost everything of value. Only some diamonds were left, Inspector—and they were in that desk. I have somewhat extensive dealings in precious stones. Was there any trace of them found?"

The Inspector laughed grimly.

"You see the room for yourself, sir. But that perhaps supplies us with the motive for the crime. I am afraid your diamonds are either blown to pieces, or in the hands of the other two men, whom I have every hope of laying my hands on shortly. There is no trace of them here."

In the hands of the other two men! The idea was a new one, which had not yet come into his calculations, so convinced had he been that all three men were dead. And suddenly he felt a sort of blinding certainty that the Inspector—though in ignorance of the real facts of the case—was right in his surmise. Diamonds are not blown to pieces by an ex-
plosion; scattered they might be—disintegrated, no. He felt he must get away to consider this new development. Where did he stand if the diamonds were indeed in the possession of the Black Gang? Would it help him or would it not, with regard to that implacable man at the Ritz?

He crossed over to the jagged hole in the wall and looked out.

“This has rather upset me, Inspector,” he said, after a while. “The South Surrey Hotel in Bloomsbury will always find me.”

“Right, sir!” The Inspector made a note, and then leaned out through the hole with a frown. “Get out of this, you there! Go on, or I’ll have you locked up as a vagrant!”

“Orl rite, orl rite! Can’t a bloke ’ave a bit o’ fun when ’e ain’t dcing no ’arm?”

The loafer, who had been ignominiously moved on from the front door, scrambled down from the lean-to roof behind, and slouched away, muttering darkly. And he was still muttering to himself as he opened the door of a taxi a few minutes later, into which Mr. Atkinson hurriedly stepped. For a moment or two he stood on the pavement until it had disappeared from view; then his prowling propensities seemed to disappear as if by magic. Still with the same shambling gait, but apparently now with some definite object in his mind, he disappeared down a side street, finally coming to a halt before a public telephone-box. He gave one rapid look round, then he stepped inside.

“Mayfair 1234.” He waited beating a tattoo
with his pennies on the box. Things had gone well that morning—very well.

"Hullo, is that you, Hugh? Yes, Peter speaking. The man Atkinson is the hunchback. Stopping South Surrey Hotel, Bloomsbury. He's just got into a taxi and gone off to the Ritz. He seemed peevish to me. . . . Yes, he inquired lovingly about the whatnots. . . . What's that? You'll toddle round to the Ritz yourself. Right ho! I'll come, too. Cocktail time. Give you full details then."

The loafer stepped out of the box and shut the door. Then, still sucking a filthy clay pipe, he shambled off in the direction of the nearest Tube station. A slight change of attire before lining up at the Ritz seemed indicated.

And it would, indeed, have been a shrewd observer who would have identified the immaculately-dressed young gentleman who strolled into the Ritz shortly before twelve o'clock with the dissolute-looking object who had so aroused the wrath of the police a few hours previously in Hoxton. The first person he saw sprawling contentedly in an easy chair was Hugh Drummond, who waved his stick in greeting.

"Draw up Peter, old lad," he boomed, "and put your nose inside a wet."

Peter Darrell took the next chair, and his eyes glanced quickly round the lounge.

"Have you seen him, Hugh?" he said, lowering his voice. "I don't see anything answering to the bird growing about the place here."
“No,” answered Hugh. “But from discreet inquiries made from old pimply-face yonder I find that he arrived here about ten o’clock. He was at once shown up to the rooms of a gent calling himself the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor, where, as far as I can make out, he has remained ever since. Anyway, I haven’t seen him trotting up and down the hall, calling to his young; nor have either of the beadles at the door reported his departure. So here I remain like a bird in the wilderness until the blighter and his padre pal break covert. I want to see the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor, Peter.”

A ball of wool rolled to his feet, and Hugh stooped to pick it up. The owner was a girl sitting close by, busily engaged in knitting some obscure garment, and Hugh handed her the wool with a bow.

“Thank you so much!” she said, with a pleasant smile. “I’m afraid I’m always dropping my wool all over the place.”

“Don’t mention it,” remarked Hugh politely. “Deuced agile little thing—a ball of wool. Spend my life picking up my ‘wife’s. Everybody seems to be knitting these jumper effects now.”

“Oh, this isn’t a jumper,” answered the girl a little sadly. “I’ve no time for such frivolities as that. You see, I’ve just come back from the famine stricken parts of Austria—and not only are the poor things hungry, but they can’t get proper clothes. So just a few of us are knitting things for them—stock sizes, you know—big, medium, and small.”
"How fearfully jolly of you!" said Hugh admiringly. "Dashed sporting thing to do. Awful affair, though, when the small size shrinks in the wash. The proud proprietor will burst out in all directions. Most disconcerting for all concerned."

The girl blushed faintly and Hugh subsided abashed in his chair.

"I must tell my wife about it," he murmured in confusion. "She's coming here to lunch, and she ought to turn 'em out like bullets from a machine gun—what?"

The girl smiled faintly as she rose.

"It would be very good of her if she would help," she remarked gently, and then, with a slight bow, she walked away in the direction of the lift.

"You know, old son," remarked Hugh, as he watched her disappearing, "it's an amazing affair when you really come to think of it. There's that girl with a face far superior to a patched boot and positively oozing virtue from every pore. And yet, would you leave your happy home for her? Look at her skirts—five inches too long; and yet she'd make a man an excellent wife. A heart of gold probably, hidden beneath innumerable strata of multi-coloured wools."

Completely exhausted he drained his cocktail, and leaned back in his chair, while Peter digested the profound utterance in silence. A slight feeling of lassitude was beginning to weigh on him owing to the atrocious hour at which he had been compelled to rise, and he felt quite unable to contribute any suitable
addition to the conversation. Not that it was required: the ferocious frown on Drummond's face indicated that he was in the throes of thought and might be expected to give tongue in the near future.

"I ought to have a bit of paper to write it all down on, Peter," he remarked at length. "I was getting it fairly clear when that sweet maiden put me completely in the soup again. In fact, I was just going to run over the whole affair with you when I had to start chasing wool all over London. Where are we, Peter? That is the question. Point one: we have the diamonds—more by luck than good management. Point two: the hunchback gentleman who has a sufficiently strong constitution to live at the South Surrey Hotel in Bloomsbury has not got the diamonds. Point three: he, at the present moment is closeted with the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor upstairs. Point four: we are about to consume another cocktail downstairs. Well—bearing that little lot in mind, what happens when we all meet?"

"Yes, what!" said Peter, coming out of a short sleep.

"A policy of masterly inactivity seems indicated," continued Hugh thoughtfully. "We may even have to see them eat. But I can't buttonhole Snooks, or whatever the blighter's name is, and ask him if he bunged a bomb at me last night, can I? It would be so deuced awkward if he hadn't. As I said before, a brief survey of the devil-dodger's face might help. And, on the other hand, it might not.
In fact, it is all very obscure, Peter—very obscure."
A slight snore was his only answer, and Hugh continued to ponder on the obscurity of the situation in silence. That several rays of light might have been thrown on it by a conversation then proceeding upstairs was of no help to him: nor could he have been expected to know that the fog of war was about to lift in a most unpleasantly drastic manner.

"Coincidence? Bosh!" the girl with the heart of gold was remarking at that very moment. "It's a certainty. Whether he's got the diamonds or not I can't say, but your big friend of last night, Zadowa, is sitting downstairs now drinking a cocktail in the lounge.

"And your big friend of last night is a gentleman with whom he and I"—she smiled thoughtfully at the Reverend Theodosius—"have a little account to settle."

"My account is not a little one," said the hunchback viciously.

"Amazing though it is, it certainly looks as if you were right, my dear," answered her father thoughtfully.

"Of course I'm right!" cried the girl. "Why, the darned thing is sticking out and barking at you. A big man, Christian name Hugh, was in Zadowa's office last night. Hugh Drummond is downstairs at the moment, having actually tracked Zadowa here. Of course, they're the same; an infant in arms could see it."

"Granted you're right," said the Reverend
Theodosius, "I confess at the moment that I am a little doubtful as to how to turn the fact to our advantage. The fact is an interesting one, my dear, more than interesting; but it don't seem to me to come within the range of practical politics just at present."

"I wonder," said the girl. "His wife is coming here to lunch. You remember her—that silly little fool Phyllis Benton? And they live in Brook Street. It might be worth trying. If by any chance he has got the diamonds—well, she'll be very useful. And if he hasn't," she shrugged her shoulders, "we can easily return her if we don't want her."

The Reverend Theodosius smiled. Long-winded explanations between the two of them were seldom necessary. Then he looked at his watch.

"Short notice," he remarked; "but we'll try. No harm done if we fail."

He stepped over to the telephone, and put through a call. And having given two or three curt orders he came slowly back into the room.

"Chances of success very small, I'm afraid; but as you say, my dear, worth trying. And now I think I'll renew my acquaintance with Drummond. It would be wiser if you had lunch sent up here, Janet; just for the time our friend had better not connect us together in any way. And as for you, Zadowa"—his tone became curt—"you can go. Let us hope for your sake that Drummond has really got them."

"There's only one point," put in the girl;
"his departure will be reported at once to Drummond. He's tipped both the men at the doors."

"Then in that case you'd better stop here," said the Reverend Theodosius. "I shall probably come up to lunch, but I might have it in the restaurant. I might"—he paused by the door—"I might even have it with Drummond and his friend."

With a short chuckle he left the room, and a minute or two later a benevolent clergymen, reading the Church Times, was sitting in the lounge just opposite Hugh and Peter. Through half-closed eyes Hugh took stock of him, wondering casually if this was the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor. If so, assuredly nothing more benevolent in the line of sky-pilots could well be imagined. And when a few minutes later the clergyman took a cigarette out of his case, and then commenced to fumble in his pockets for matches which he had evidently forgotten, Hugh rose and offered him one.

"Allow me, sir," he murmured, holding it out.

"I thank you, sir," said the clergyman, with a charming smile. "I'm so terribly forgetful over matches. As a matter of fact I don't generally smoke before lunch, but I've had such a distressing morning that I felt I must have a cigarette just to soothe my nerves."

"By Jove! that's bad," remarked Hugh. "Bath water cold, and all that?"

"Nothing so trivial, I fear," said the other. "No; a poor man who has been with me since ten has just suffered the most terrible blow."
I could hardly have believed it possible here in London, but the whole of his business premises were wrecked by a bomb last night."

"You don't say so," murmured Hugh, sinking into a chair, and at the table opposite Peter Darrell opened one eye.

"All his papers—everything—gone. And it has hit me, too. Quite a respectable little sum of money—over a hundred pounds, gathered together for the restoration of the old oak chancel in my church—blown to pieces by this unknown miscreant. It's hard, sir, it's hard. But this poor fellow's loss is greater than mine, so I must not complain. To the best of my poor ability I have been helping him to bear his misfortune with fortitude and strength."

The clergyman took off his spectacles and wiped them, and Drummond stole a lightning glance at Darrell. The faintest shrug of his shoulders indicated that the latter had heard, and was as much in the dark as Hugh. That this was the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor was now obvious, but what a charming, courteous old gentleman! It seemed impossible to associate guilt with such a delightful person, and, if so, they had made a bad mistake. It was not the hunchback who had thrown the bomb; they were up another blind alley.

For a while Hugh chatted with him about the outrage, then he glanced at his watch.

"Nearly time for lunch, I think," said the clergyman. "Perhaps you would give a lonely old man the pleasure of your company."

"Very nice of you, but I'm expecting my wife," said Hugh. "She said she'd be here
at one, and now it's a quarter past. Perhaps you'll lunch with us?"

"Charmed," said the clergyman, taking a note which a page-boy was handing to him on a tray. "Charmed." He glanced through the note, and placed it in his pocket. "The ladies, bless them! so often keep us waiting."

"I'll just go and ring up," said Drummond. "She may have changed her mind."

"Another prerogative of their sex," beamed his companion, as Drummond left him. He polished his spectacles and once more resumed his perusal of the *Church Times*, bowing in old-world fashion to two or three acquaintances who passed. And more and more was Peter Darrell becoming convinced that a big mistake had been made somewhere, when Hugh returned looking a little worried.

"Can't make it out, Peter," he said anxiously. "Just got through to Denny, and Phyllis left half an hour ago to come here."

"Probably doing a bit of shopping, old man," answered Peter reassuringly. "I say, Hugh, we've bloomered over this show."

Hugh glanced across at the table where the clergyman was sitting, and suddenly Peter found his arm gripped with a force that made him cry out. He glanced at Hugh, and that worthy was staring at the clergyman with a look of speechless amazement on his face. Then he swung round, and his eyes were blazing.

"Peter!" he said tensely. "Look at him. The one trick that gives him away every time!"
Bloomered, have we?  Great heavens above, man, it's Carl Peterson!"

A little dazedly Darrell glanced at the clergyman.  He was still reading the Church Times, but with his left hand he was drumming a ceaseless tattoo on his knee.