CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH COUNT ZADOWA IS INTRODUCED TO "ALICE IN WONDERLAND"

A quarter of an hour later the two young men stepped into Piccadilly. Evidently Phyllis was not proposing to turn up, and nothing was to be gained by remaining. The next move lay with the other side, and until it was played it was merely a question of marking time. At the entrance to the Ritz they separated, Peter turning eastwards to keep some mysterious date with a female minor star of theatrical London, while Hugh strolled along Berkeley Street towards his house. At times a faint smile crossed his face at the thought of Peterson devoting his young brain to the matter of starving Austrians, but for the most part a portentous frown indicated thought. For the life of him he couldn't see what was going to happen next. It appeared to him that the air wanted clearing; that in military parlance the situation was involved. And it was just as he was standing in Berkeley Square, waving his stick vaguely as a material aid to thought, that he felt a touch on his arm.

"Excuse me, sir," said a voice at his elbow, "but I would like a few words with you."

He looked down, and his eyes narrowed
suddenly. Standing beside him was the hunchback, Mr. Atkinson, and for a moment Hugh regarded him in silence. Then, dismissing a strong inclination to throw this unexpected apparition under a passing furniture van, he raised his eyebrows slightly and removed his cigar from his mouth. Evidently the next move had begun, and he felt curious as to what form it would take.

"My powers as a conversationalist are well known," he remarked, "amongst a large and varied circle. I was not, however, aware that you belonged to it. In other words, sir, who the deuce are you and what the dickens do you want to talk to me about?"

"Something which concerns us both very intimately," returned the other. "And with regard to the first part of your question—do you think it necessary to keep up the pretence, especially as there are no witnesses present? I suggest, however, that as our conversation may be a trifle prolonged, and this spot is somewhat draughty, we should adjourn to your house; Brook Street, I believe, is where you live, Captain Drummond."

Hugh removed his cigar, and stared at the hunchback thoughtfully.

"I haven't the slightest wish to have a prolonged conversation with you in any place, draughty or otherwise," he remarked at length. "However, if you are prepared to run the risk of being slung out of the window if you bore me, I'll give you ten minutes."

He turned on his heel and strolled slowly on towards his house, while the hunchback,
shooting venomous glances at him from time to time, walked by his side in silence. And it was not until some five minutes later when they were both in Drummond’s study that any further remark was made.

It was Hugh who spoke, standing with his back to the fireplace, and looking down on the misshapen little man who sat in an arm-chair facing the light. An unpleasant customer, he reflected, now that he saw him close to for the first time: a dangerous, vindictive little devil—but able, distinctly able. Just such a type as Peterson would choose for a tool.

“What is it you wish to say to me?” he said curtly.

“A few things, Captain Drummond,” returned the other, “that may help to clear the air. In the first place may I say how pleased I am to make your acquaintance in the flesh, so to speak? I have long wanted a little talk with the leader of the Black Gang.”

“I trust,” murmured Hugh solicitously, “that the sun hasn’t proved too much for you.”

“Shall we drop this beating about the bush?” snapped the other.

“I shall drop you down the stairs if you talk to me like that, you damned little microbe,” said Hugh coldly, and the other got to his feet with a snarl. His eyes, glaring like those of an angry cat, were fixed on Drummond, who suddenly put out a vast hand to screen the lower part of the hunchback’s face. With a cry of fear he recoiled, and Hugh smiled grimly. So it had been Mr. Atkinson himself who had
flung the bomb the night before: the eyes that had glared at him through the crack in the door were unmistakably the same as those he had just looked into over his own hand. With the rest of the face blotted out to prevent distraction there could be no doubt about it, and he was still smiling grimly as he lowered his hand.

"So you think I'm the leader of the Black Gang, do you?" he remarked. "I don't know that I'm very interested in your thoughts."

"I don't think: I know," said the hunchback viciously. "I found it out to-day."

"Indeed," murmured Hugh politely. "Would it be indiscreet to ask how you found out this interesting fact?"

"Do you deny it?" demanded the other furiously.

"My dear little man," said Hugh, "if you said I was the Pope I wouldn't deny it. All I ask is that now you've afflicted me with your presence you should amuse me. What are your grounds for this somewhat startling statement?"

"My grounds are these," said the hunchback, recovering his self-control: "last night my office in Hoxton was wrecked by a bomb."

"Good Lord!" interrupted Hugh mildly, "it must be old Theodosius Longmoor and his hundred quid. I thought he looked at me suspiciously during lunch."

"It was wrecked by a bomb, Captain Drummond," continued the other, not heeding the interruption. "That bomb also killed a man."
"It did," agreed Hugh grimly.
"One of the three men who broke in. The other two escaped—how I don’t know. But one of them was recognised by the clerk downstairs."
"I gathered that was the story," said Hugh.
"He was recognised as the leader of the Black Gang," continued the hunchback. "And that was all until to-day. Just the leader of the Black Gang—an unknown person. But to-day—at the Ritz, Captain Drummond—my clerk, who had brought me a message, recognised him again, without his disguise. No longer an unknown man, you understand—but you."

Drummond smiled, and selected a cigarette from his case.
"Very pretty," he answered, "but a trifle crude. As I understand you, I gather that your shrewd and intelligent clerk states that the leader of the Black Gang broke into your office last night in order to indulge in the doubtful pastime of throwing bombs about the premises. He further states that I am the humorist in question. Allowing for the moment that your clerk is sane, what do you propose to do about it?"

"In certain eventualities, Captain Drummond, I propose to send an anonymous letter to Scotland Yard. Surprised though they would be to get it, it might help them to clear up the mystery of Mr. Latter’s insanity. It may prove rather unpleasant for you, of course, but that can’t be helped."

"It’s kind of you to give me a loophole of
escape,” said Drummond pleasantly. “What are the eventualities to which you allude?”

“The non-return to me of a little bag containing diamonds,” remarked the hunchback quietly. “They were in the desk which was wrecked by the bomb.”

“Dear, dear,” said Hugh. “Am I supposed to have them in my possession?”

“I can only hope most sincerely for your sake that you have,” returned the other. “Otherwise I’m afraid that letter will go to the police.”

For a while Drummond smoked in silence: then, with a lazy smile on his face, he sat down in an arm-chair facing the hunchback.

“Most interesting,” he drawled. “Most interesting and entertaining. I’m not very quick, Mr. ——, I’ve forgotten under what name you inflict yourself on a long-suffering world, but I shall call you Snooks—I’m not, as I say, very quick, Snooks, but as far as my brain can grapple with the problem it stands thus. If I give you back a packet of diamonds which I may, or may not, possess you will refrain from informing the police that I am the leader of the Black Gang. If, on the contrary, I do not give them back to you, you will send them that interesting piece of information by means of an anonymous letter.” The smile grew even lazier. “Well, you damned little excrescence, I call your bluff. Get on with it.”

With a snarl of rage the hunchback snatched up his hat and rose to his feet.

“You call it bluff, do you?”—and his voice
was shaking with fury. "Very good, you fool—I accept. And you'll be sorry when you see my cards."

"Sit down, Snooks: I haven't finished with you yet." There was still the same maddening smile on Drummond's face, which disappeared suddenly as the hunchback moved towards the door. In two strides Hugh had him by the collar, and with a force that made his teeth rattle Mr. Atkinson found himself back in his chair.

"I said sit down, Snooks," said Drummond pleasantly. "Don't let me have to speak to you again, or I might hurt you. There are one or two things I have to say to you before depriving myself of the pleasure of your company. By the post following the one which carries your interesting disclosure will go another letter addressed to Sir Bryan Johnstone himself. I shall be in the office when he opens it—and we shall both be roaring with laughter over the extraordinary delusion that I—quite the biggest fool of his acquaintance—could possibly be the leader of the Black Gang. And, as if to prove the utter absurdity of the suggestion, this second letter will be from the leader of the Black Gang himself. In it he will state that he was present at 5, Green Street, Hoxton, last night in an endeavour to obtain possession of the anarchist and Bolshevist literature stored there. That he took with him a professional burglar to assist him in opening the safe and other things which might be there, and that while engaged in this eminently virtuous proceeding he found
that he was trapped in the room by some mechanical device. And then, Snooks, will come a very interesting disclosure. He will state how suddenly he saw through a crack in the door a pair of eyes looking at him. And their colour—see, what is the colour of your eyes, Snooks?—grey-blue, very noticeable. Much the same as old Longmoor's—though his are a little bluer. And then the owner of the eyes, Snooks, was so inconsiderate as to throw a bomb in the room; a bomb which killed one of the men, and wrecked the desk. So that the owner of the eyes, Snooks, grey-blue eyes just like yours, is a murderer—a common murderer. And we hang men in England for murder.” He paused and stared at the hunchback. “This is a jolly game, isn’t it?”

“And you really imagine,” said the hunchback contemptuously, “that even your police would believe such a story that a man would wreck his own office, when on your own showing he had the men trapped inside it.”

“Probably not,” said Drummond affably. “Any more than that they would believe that I was the leader of the Black Gang. So since they’re such a wretched crowd of unbelievers I don’t think it’s much good playing that game, Snooks. Waste of time, isn’t it? So I vote we play another one, all on our own—a little game of make-believe—like we used to play in the nursery.”

“I haven’t an idea what you’re talking about, Captain Drummond,” said the hunchback, shifting uneasily in his chair. For all trace of affability had vanished from the face
of the man opposite him, to be replaced by an expression which made Mr. Atkinson pass his tongue once or twice over lips that had suddenly gone dry.

"Haven't you, you rat?" said Drummond quietly. "Then I'll tell you. Just for the next five minutes we're going to pretend that these two astonishing statements which the police—stupid fellows—won't believe are true. We're going to pretend—only pretend, mind you, Snooks—that I am the leader of the Black Gang; and we're going to pretend that you are the man who flung the bomb last night. Just for five minutes only, then we go back to reality and unbelieving policemen."

And if during the following five minutes strange sounds were heard by Denny in the room below, he was far too accustomed to the sounds of breaking furniture to worry. It wasn't until the hunchback pulled a knife that Drummond warmed to his work, but from that moment he lost his temper. And because the hunchback was a hunchback—though endowed withal by Nature with singular strength—it jarred on Drummond to fight him as if he had been a normal man. So he flogged him with a rhinoceros-hide whip till his arm ached, and then he flung him into a chair, gasping, cursing, and scarcely human.

"You shouldn't be so realistic in your stories, Snooks," he remarked affably, though his eyes were still merciless as he looked at the writhing figure. "And I feel quite sure that that is what the leader of the Black Gang would have done if he had met the peculiar
humorist who threw that bomb last night. Bad habit—throwing bombs."

With a final curse the hunchback staggered to his feet, and his face was diabolical in its fury.

"You shall pay for that, Captain Drummond, stroke by stroke, and lash by lash," he said in a shaking voice.

Drummond laughed shortly.

"All the same old patter," he remarked. "Tell old Longmoor with my love——" He paused and grinned. "No, on second thoughts I think I'll tell his reverence myself—at the appointed time."

"What will you tell him?" sneered the hunchback.

"Why, that his church isn't the only place where dry-rot has set in. It's prevalent amongst his pals as well. Must you go? Straight down the stairs, and the card tray in the hall is only electro-plate—so you might leave it."

With a great effort Mr. Atkinson pulled himself together. His shoulders were still aching abominably from the hiding Drummond had given him, but his loss of self-control had been due more to mental than to physical causes. Immensely powerful though Drummond was, his clothes had largely broken the force of the blows for the hunchback. And now as he stood by the door the uppermost thought in his mind was that he had failed utterly and completely in the main object of his interview. He had come, if possible, to get the diamonds, and failing that, to find out
for certain whether Drummond had them in his possession or not. And the net result had been a flogging and nothing more. Too late he realised that in dealing with men of the type of Hugh Drummond anything in the nature of a threat is the surest guarantee of a thick ear obtainable: but then Mr. Atkinson was not used to dealing with men of that type. And the uppermost thought in his mind at the moment was not how he could best revenge himself on this vast brute who had flogged him, but what he was going to say to the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor when he got back to the Ritz. The question of revenge could wait till later.

“Can we come to an understanding, Captain Drummond?” he remarked quietly. “I can assure you, of course, that you have made a terrible mistake in thinking that it was I who threw that bomb at you last night.”

“At me?” Drummond laughed shortly. “Who said you’d thrown it at me? That wasn’t the game at all, Snooks. You threw it at the leader of the Black Gang.”

“Can’t we put our cards on the table?” returned the other with studied moderation. “I know that you are that leader, you know it—though it is possible that no one else would believe it. I was wrong to threaten you—I should have known better; I apologise. But if I may say so I have had my punishment. Now as man to man—can we come to terms?”

“I am waiting,” said Hugh briefly. “Kindly be as concise as possible.”

“Those diamonds, Captain Drummond.
Rightly or wrongly I feel tolerably certain that you either have them in your possession, or that you know where they are. Now those diamonds were not mine—did you speak? No. Well—to resume. The diamonds were not mine; they had been deposited in the desk in my office unknown to me. Then this fool—whom you foolishly think was myself—threw the bomb into the office to kill you. I admit it; he told me all about it. He did not kill you, for which fact, if I may say so, I am very glad. You’re a sportsman, and you’ve fought like a sportsman—but our fight, Captain Drummond, has been over other matters. The diamonds are a side-show and hardly concern you and me. I’ll be frank with you; they are the sole wealth saved by a Russian nobleman from the Bolshevist outrages. He deposited them in my office during my absence, with the idea of my selling them for him—and now he and his family must starve. And so what I propose is——"

"I don’t think I want to hear your proposal, Snooks," said Drummond kindly. "Doubtless I look a fool; doubtless I am a fool, but I like to think that I’m not a congenital idiot. I’m glad you have discovered that it’s not much use threatening me; but to tell you the strict truth, I prefer threats to nauseating hypocrisy. So much so in fact that the thought of that starving nobleman impels me to take more exercise. Ever read *Alice in Wonderland*, Snooks? A charming book—a masterpiece of English literature. And there is one singularly touching, not to say fruity,"
bit which concerns Father William—and a genteel young man."

With a look of complete bewilderment on his face Mr. Atkinson felt himself propelled through the door, until he came to a halt at the top of the stairs.

"It's a little poem, Snooks, and some day I will recite it to you. Just now I can only remember the one singularly beautiful line which has suggested my new form of exercise."

Mr. Atkinson became aware of a boot in the lower portion of his back, and then the stairs seemed to rise up and hit him. He finally came to rest in the hall against an old oak chest of the pointed-corner type, and for a moment or two he lay there dazed. Then he scrambled to his feet to find three young men, who had emerged from a lower room during his flight, gazing at him impassively: while standing at the top of the stairs down which he had just descended and outlined against a window was the huge, motionless figure of Drummond. Half cursing, half sobbing, he staggered to the front door and opened it. Once more he looked back—not one of the four men had moved. They were just staring at him in absolute silence, and, with a sudden feeling of pure terror, Count Zadowa, alias Mr. Atkinson, shut the door behind him and staggered into the sunlit street.