CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH THINGS HAPPEN AT MAYBRICK HALL

Had the Italian come up five minutes sooner—a minute even—all would have been well. As it was, at the very moment when Drummond's crashing blow took him on the point of the jaw with mathematical precision, another mathematical law began to operate elsewhere—the law of gravity. Something fell from a ceiling on to a table in the room below that ceiling, even as in days gone by an apple descended into the eye of the discoverer of that law.

The two men seated in the room below the ceiling in question failed to notice it at first. They were not interested in mathematics but they were interested in their conversation. One was the red-headed man of whom Phyllis had spoken: the other was a nondescript type of individual who looked like an ordinary middle-class professional man.

"Our organisation has, of course, grown immensely," he was saying. "Our Socialist Sunday Schools, as you may know, were started twenty-five years ago. A very small beginning, my friend, but the result now would stagger you. And wishy-washy stuff was taught to
start with too; now I think even you would be satisfied.”

Something splashed on the table beside him, but he took no notice.

“Blasphemy, of course—or rather what the Bourgeois call blasphemy—is instilled at once. We teach them to fear no God; we drive into them each week that the so-called God is merely a weapon of the Capitalist class to keep them quiet, and that if it had not that effect they would see what a machine-gun could do. And, Yulowski, it is having its effect. Get at the children has always been my motto—for they are the next generation. They can be moulded like plastic clay; their parents, so often, are set in a groove. We preach class hatred—and nothing but class hatred. We give them songs to sing—songs with a real catchy tune. There’s one very good one in which the chorus goes:

“‘Come, workers, sing a rebel song, a song of love and hate,
Of love unto the lowly and of hatred to the great.’”

He paused to let the full effect of the sublime stanza sink in, and again something splashed on to the table.

Yulowski nodded his head indifferently.

“I admit its value, my friend,” he remarked in a curious husky whisper. “And in your country I suppose you must go slowly. I fear my inclinations lead towards something more rapid and—er—drastic. Sooner or later the Bourgeois must be exterminated all the world over. On that we are agreed. Why not make it sooner as we did in Russia? The best treat-
ment for any of the Capitalist class is a bayonet in the stomach and a rifle butt on the head.”

He smiled reminiscently, a thin, cruel smile, and once again there came an unheeded splash.

“I have heard it said,” remarked the other man, with the faintest hesitation, “that you yourself were responsible in Russia for a good many of them.”

The smile grew more pronounced and cruel.

“It was I, my friend, who battered out the brains of two members of the Arch Tyrant’s family. Yes, I—I who sit here.” His voice rose to a sort of throaty shout, and his eyes gleamed. “You can guess who I mean, can’t you?”

“Two girls,” muttered the other, recoiling a little in spite of himself.

“Two—” The foul epithet went unuttered; Yulowski was staring fascinated at the table. “Holy Mother! what’s that?”

His companion swung round, and every vestige of colour left his face. On the table was a big red pool, and even as he watched it there came another splash and a big drop fell into it.

“Blood!” he stammered, and his lips were shaking. “It’s blood.” And then he heard the Russian’s voice, low and tense.

“Look at the ceiling, man; look at the ceiling.”

He stared upwards and gave a little cry of horror. Slowly spreading over the white plaster was a great crimson stain, whilst from a crack in the middle the steady drip fell on to the table.
It was Yulowski who recovered himself first; he was more used to such sights than his companion.

"There's been murder done," he shouted hoarsely, and dashed out of the room. Doors were flung open, and half a dozen men rushed up the stairs after him. There was no doubt which the room was, and headed by Yulowski they crowded in — only to stop and stare at what lay on the floor.

"It's the Greek," muttered one of them "He was guarding the girl. And someone has severed the main artery in his arm."

With one accord they dashed across the passage to the room where Phyllis had been. In a second the door was broken in, and they saw the unconscious Italian lying on the bed.

"The Black Gang," muttered someone fearfully, and Yulowski cursed him for a cowardly swine. And it was his hoarse voice that Drummond heard shouting for the power to be switched on, as he turned and darted across the lawn.

Completely ignorant of what had taken place, he was just as ignorant of what was meant by switching on the power. His one thought now was to get away with Phyllis. A start meant everything, and at the best he couldn't hope for a long one. With his arm through hers he urged her forward, while behind him he heard a confused shouting which gradually died away under the peremptory orders of someone who seemed to be in command. And almost subconsciously he noticed
that the thudding noise had ceased; only
the faint humming of the engine broke the
silence.

Suddenly in front of him he saw the fence
which had caused him to wonder earlier in the
evening. It was just the same in this part
as it had been in the other, but he wasn’t
concerned with speculations about it now.
The only thing he was thankful for was that it
was easy to get through.

He was not five feet from it, when it happened
—the amazing and at the moment inexplicable
thing. For months after he used to wake in
the night and lie sweating with horror at the
nearness of the escape. For it would have been
Phyllis who would have gone through first;
it would have been Phyllis, who—But it
did happen—just in time.

He saw a dark shape dart across the open
towards the fence, an animal carrying some-
thing in its mouth. It reached the fence, and
the next instant it bounded an incredible height
in the air, only to fall backwards on to the
ground and lie motionless almost at Drum-
mond’s feet. It was so utterly unexpected that
he paused instinctively and stared at it. It
was a fox, and the fowl it had been carrying
lay a yard away. It lay there rigid and motion-
less, and completely bewildered he bent and
touched it, only to draw back his hand as if
he’d been stung. A sharp stabbing pain shot
up his arm, as if he’d had an electric shock—
and suddenly he understood, and with a cry of
fear he dragged Phyllis back just in time.

The brain moves rapidly at times; the
inherent connection of things takes place in a flash. And the words he had used to the Italian "È pericoloso sporgersi," took him back to Switzerland, where the phrase is written on every railway carriage. And in Switzerland, you may see those heavy steel pylons with curved pointed hooks to prevent people climbing up, and red bands painted with the words Danger de mort. Live wires there are at the top, carried on insulators—even as the fence wires were carried through insulators in the uprights.

Danger de mort. And the fox had been electrocuted. That was what the man had meant by shouting for the power to be switched on. And as he stood there still clutching Phyllis's arm, and shaken for the moment out of his usual calm, there came from the direction of the house, the deep-throated baying of a big hound.

"What is it, Hugh?" said Phyllis in an agonised whisper.

With terrified eyes she was staring at the body of the fox, stiff and rigid in death, and with its jaws parted in a hideous snarl. And again there came from the direction of the house a deep-throated bay.

Then suddenly she realised that her husband was speaking—quietly, insistently. Only too well did he know the danger: only too well did he know that never before in his life had the situation been so tight. But no sign of it showed on his face: not a trace of indecision appeared in his voice. The position was desperate, the remedy must be desperate too:
"We can't climb through the fence, dear," he was saying calmly. "You see they've switched an electric current through the wires, and if you touch one you'll be electrocuted. Also they seem to have turned an unpleasant little animal into the garden, so we can't stay here. At least—you can't. So I'm going to throw you over the top."

In an agony of fear she clung to him for a moment: then as she saw his quiet, set face she pulled herself together and smiled. There was no time for argument now: there was no time for anything except instant action. And being a thoroughbred, she was, not going to hinder him by any weakness on her part. Of fear for herself she felt no trace: her faith and trust in her husband was absolute. And so she stood there silently waiting while he measured height and distance with his eye.

Of his ability to get her over he felt no doubt: but when a mistake means death to the woman he loves a man does not take risks.

"Come, dear," he said after a moment's pause. "Put your knees close up to your chin, and try and keep like a ball until you feel yourself falling."

She doubled herself up and he picked her up. One hand held both her feet—the other gripped the waistband at the back of her skirt. Once he lifted her above his head to the full extent of his arms to free his muscles: then he took a little run and threw her up and forward with all his strength. And she cleared the top strand by two feet.
She landed unhurt in some bushes, and when she had scrambled to her feet she realised he was speaking again—imperatively, urgently.

"Get the gang, darling: somehow or other get the gang. I'll try and get you a good start. But—hurry."

The next instant he had disappeared into the undergrowth, and only just in time. A huge hound running mute had dashed into the clearing where a second or two before they had been standing, and was cautiously approaching the dead fox. She stared at it fascinated, and then with a little cry of terror she pulled herself together and ran. She had forgotten the fence that was between them: for the moment she had forgotten everything except this huge brute that looked the size of a calf. And the hound, seeing the flutter of her dress, forgot things too. A dead fox could wait, a living human was better fun by far. He bounded forward: gave one agonised roar as he hit the fence, and turning a complete somersault lay still. And as Phyllis stumbled blindly on, she suddenly heard Hugh's cheerful voice from the darkness behind her, apparently addressing the world at large.

"Roll up! roll up! roll up! one fox: one Pomeranian: one fowl. No charge for admittance. Visitors are requested not to touch the exhibits."

And then loud and clear the hoot of an owl thrice repeated. It was a message for her, she knew—not a senseless piece of bravado: a message to tell her that he was all right. But the call at the end was the urgent call of the
gang, and though he was safe at the moment she knew there was no time to be lost. And, with a little prayer that she would choose the right direction, she broke into the steady run of the girl who beagles when she goes beagling, and doesn’t sit on the top of a hill and watch. Hugh had never let her down yet: it was her turn now.

To what extent it was her turn, perhaps it was as well that she did not realise. Even Drummond, hidden in the undergrowth just by the clearing where lay the body of the hound, was ignorant of the nature of the odds against him. He had not the slightest idea how many men there were in the house—and while it remained dark he didn’t much care. In the dark he felt confident of dealing with any number, or at any rate of eluding them. It was the thing of all others that his soul loved—that grim fighting at night, when a man looks like the trunk of a tree, and the trunk of a tree looks like a man. It was in that that he was unequalled—superb: and the inmates of Maybrick Hall would have been well advised to have stayed their hands till the light came. Then the position, in military parlance, could have been taken without loss. An unarmed man is helpless when he can be seen.

But since the inmates were ignorant of what they were up against, they somewhat foolishly decided on instant action. They came streaming across in a body in the track of the dead hound, and by so doing they played straight into the hands of the man who crouched in the shadows close by them. He listened for one
moment to the babel of tongues of every nationality, and decided that a little more English might adjust the average. So without a sound he faded away from his hiding-place; and emerged from the undergrowth ten yards nearer the house. Then with his collar turned up, and his shoulders hunched together, he joined the group. And a man-eating tiger in their midst would have been a safer addition to the party.

Certain it is that the next quarter of an hour proved a period of such terror for the inmates of Maybrick Hall that at the end of that time they reassembled at the house and flatly refused to budge, despite the threats and curses of the red-headed Russian. For Drummond had heard the original orders—to form a line of beaters and shoot on sight—and had smiled gently to himself in the darkness. There is always an element of humour in stalking the stalkers, and when the line formed up at intervals of two or three yards the quarry was behind it. Moreover the quarry was angry, with the cold, steady rage of a powerful man who realises exactly what he is up against. Shoot on sight was the order, and Drummond accepted the terms.

Slowly the line of shadowy men moved forward through the undergrowth, and creeping behind them came the man they were out to kill. And gradually he edged nearer and nearer to the wire fence, until he was following the outside man of the line. He saw him pause for a moment peering round a bush, with his revolver ready in his hand. And then the terror started. The beater next to the victim
had a fleeting vision of a huge black object springing through the darkness: a muttered curse and a gurgle—and a dreadful strangled scream. And the outside beater was no more. He had been hurled against the live-wire fence as if he was a child—and the exhibits had been increased by one.

With a hoarse cry of fear the man who had been next him turned and ran towards the house, only to find himself seized from behind with a grip of iron. It was Franz, and as he stared into the face of the man whom he knew to be drowned he gave a squawk like a trapped rabbit. But there was nothing ghostly about the hands round his neck, and as he felt himself being rushed towards the fence of death he began to struggle furiously. But Drummond was mad at the moment, and though Franz was a powerful man he might have saved himself the trouble. A terrific blow hit him on the face, and with a grunt he fell back against the fence. The exhibits were increased by two, and through the darkness rang a cheerful laugh, followed by the hooting of an owl.

And now the line was broken, and men were crashing about in all directions shouting hoarsely. Experts of the Red Terror they might be—butcherers of women and children whose sole fault lay in the fact that they washed: that night they found themselves up against a terror far worse than even their victims had ever experienced. For they, poor wretches, knew what was coming: the men who ran shouting through the undergrowth
did not. Here, there, and everywhere they heard the hooting of an owl: they formed into bunches of twos and threes for protection, they blazed away with compressed-air revolvers at harmless rhododendron bushes, and sometimes at their own pals. And every now and then a great black figure would leap silently out of the darkness on to some straggler: there would be a bellow of fear and pain—followed by an ominous silence, which was broken a second or two later by the hooting of an owl twenty yards away.

Occasionally they saw him—a dim, fleeting shadow, and once four of them fired at him simultaneously. But luck was with him, and though two holes were drilled in his coat Drummond was not hit himself. His quiet laugh came suddenly from behind them, and even as they swung round cursing, one of them collapsed choking with a bullet through his chest. It was the first time he had used his first victim's revolver, but the target was too tempting to be let off. And at last they could stand it no longer. They had no idea how many men they were up against, and a complete panic set in. With one accord they rushed for the house, and a mocking peal of laughter followed them as they ran. For Drummond had gambled on that, and he had won. In the position of knowing that every man was his enemy, he had been at an advantage over the others, who were never sure who was a friend. For a while he listened to the flood of lurid blasphemy which came from the open windows of the room into which they
had crowded: then he dodged along the bushes and looked in. For a moment he was sorely tempted to fire: in fact he went so far as to draw a bead on the red-headed Russian, who was gesticulating furiously. Then his hand dropped to his side: shooting into the brown was not his idea of the game. And at the same moment, the lights were switched off in the room: it had evidently struck someone inside that the position was a trifle insecure. The talking ceased abruptly, and with a faint grin on his face Drummond swung round and vanished into the deepest part of the undergrowth. It was necessary to do some thinking.

He had got the start he wanted for Phyllis, which was all to the good, but he was as far as ever himself from getting out. There was still the fence to be negotiated if he was to escape, and common sense told him that there wasn't the remotest chance of the current having been switched off. And incidentally it didn't much matter whether it had been or not, since the only way of finding out for certain was to touch one of the wires—a thing he had not the faintest intention of doing. He could still hear the steady thrumming of the engine, and so the fence was out of the question.

Delving into memories of the past, when he had sat at the feet of the stinks master at his school, he tried to remember some of the gems of wisdom, anent electricity, which had fallen from his lips. But since his sole occupation during such lectures had been the surreptitious
manufacture of sulphuretted hydrogen from a retort concealed below his desk, he finally gave up the attempt in despair. One thing was certain; the fence must be continuous. From knowledge gained from the sparking plugs of his car, he knew that a break in the circuit was fatal. Therefore, there could be no break in the fence which encircled the house. And if that was so—how about the drive? How did the drive pass through the fence? There must be a break there, or something capable of forming a break. A motor-car will not go over an eight-foot fence, and he had seen the wheel tracks of a car quite clearly on the drive earlier in the evening.

Yes—he would try the gate. It was imperative to get away, and that as soon as possible. When dawn came, and the first faint streaks were already beginning to show in the east, he realised that he would be at a hopeless disadvantage. Moreover the absolute silence which now reigned after the turmoil and shouting of the last few minutes struck him as ominous. And Drummond was far too clever a man to underrate his opponents. The panic had been but a temporary affair; and the panic was now over.

He began to thread his way swiftly and silently in the direction of the drive. Not for a second did he relax his caution, though he felt tolerably certain that all his opponents were still inside the house. Only too well did he know that the greatest danger often lies when things seem safest. But he reached the edge of the drive without incident, and started
to skirt along it away from the house. At last he saw the gate, and turned deeper into the undergrowth. He wanted to examine it at leisure, before making up his mind as to what he would do. As far as he could see from the outline he could make out against the road, it was an ordinary heavy wooden gate, such as may be seen frequently at the entrance to small country houses.

A tiny lodge lay on one side: the usual uncared for undergrowth on the other. He could see the wire fence coming to the gatepost on each side; he could see that the strands were bunched together at the gate, as telegraph wires are bunched when they pass underneath a bridge on a railway line. And it was while he was cogitating on the matter that he saw a man approaching from the other side. He came up to the gate, climbed over it with the utmost nonchalance, and turned into the little lodge. And Hugh noticed that as he climbed he was careful to avoid the second horizontal from the ground. At last it seemed to him that everything was clear. Contact was made through the latch; the current passed along the wires which were laid on the top of the second horizontal from the ground, and thence to the continuation of the fence on the other side. Anyway, whatever the electrical device, if this man could climb the gate in safety—so could he. There was a risk—a grave risk. It meant going out into the open; it meant exposing himself for a considerable period. But every moment he delayed the light grew better, and the risk became worse.
And it was either that or waiting in the garden till daylight made his escape impossible. And still he hung back.

Men who knew Hugh Drummond well often said that he had a strange sixth sense which enabled him to anticipate danger, when to others with him everything seemed perfectly safe. Well-nigh fantastic stories were told of him by men who had accompanied him on those unofficial patrols he had carried out in No Man’s Land whenever his battalion was in the line, and frequently when it wasn’t. And as he stood there motionless as a statue, with only the ceaseless movement of his eyes to show his strained attention, that sixth sense of his warned him, and continued warning him insistently. There was danger: he felt it, he knew it—though where it lay he couldn’t tell.

And then suddenly he again saw a man approaching from the other side—a man who climbed the gate with the utmost nonchalance and turned into the little lodge. He too carefully avoided the second horizontal from the ground, but Drummond was not paying any attention to the gate now. Once again his sixth sense had saved him, for it was the same man who had climbed over the first time. And why should a man adopt such a peculiar form of amusement, unless he was deliberately acting as a decoy? He had disappeared into the lodge, only to leave it again by a back entrance—and in an instant the whole thing was clear. They had gambled on his going to the gate: they had gambled on his having
a dart for it when he saw the gate was safe to climb. And he smiled grimly when he realised how nearly they had won their bet.

Suddenly his eyes riveted themselves on the little hedge in front of the lodge. Something had stirred there: a twig had snapped. And the smile grew more grim as he stared at the shadow. Up to date it was the gate that had occupied his attention—now he saw that the hedge was alive with men. And after a while he began to shake gently with laughter. The idea of the perspiring sportsman trotting in and out of the back door, to show off his particular line in gates, while a grim bunch of bandits lay on their stomachs in the dew, hoping for the best, appealed to his sense of humour. For the moment the fact that he was now hopelessly trapped did not trouble him: his whole soul went out to the painstaking gate-hopper. If only he would do it again—that was his one prayer. And sure enough about five minutes later he hove in sight again, stepping merrily and brightly along the road.

His nonchalance was superb: he even hummed gently to show his complete disdain for gates in general and this one in particular. And then Drummond plugged him through the leg. He felt that it would have been a crime to end the career of such a bright disposition: so he plugged him through the fleshy part of the leg. And the man’s howl of pain and Drummond’s raucous bellow of laughter broke the silence simultaneously.

Not the least merry interlude, he reflected,
in an evening devoted to fun and games, as he took cover rapidly behind a big tree. For bullets were whistling through the undergrowth in all directions, as the men who had been lying under cover of the hedge rose and let fly. And then quite abruptly the shooting died away, and Drummond became aware that a car was approaching. The headlights were throwing fantastic shadows through the bushes, and outlined against the glare he could see the figures of his opponents. Now was his chance, and with the quickness of the born soldier he acted on it. ‘If the car was to come in they must open the gate; and since nothing blinds anyone so completely as the dazzle of strong headlights, he might be able to slip out unseen, just after the car had passed through. He skirted rapidly to one side out of the direct beam: then he made his way towards the lodge, keeping well out on the flank. And from a concealed position under cover of the little house he awaited developments.

The man he had shot through the leg was unceremoniously bundled on to the grass beside the drive, whilst another man climbed the gate and went up to the car, which had come to a standstill ten yards or so away. Drummond heard the sound of a window being lowered, and an excited conversation: then the man who had approached the car stepped back again into the glare of the headlights.

“Open the gate,” he said curtly, and there was a sardonic grin on his face.

And now Drummond was waiting tensely. If he was to bring it off it would be a matter of
seconds and half-seconds. Little by little he edged nearer to the drive, as a man with what appeared to be a huge glove on his hand approached the gate. There was a bright flash as he pressed down the catch and the circuit was broken, and at the same moment the headlights on the car went out, while an inside light was switched on.

And Drummond stopped dead—frozen in his tracks. The car was moving forward slowly, and he could see the people inside clearly. One was Count Zadowa—alias Mr. Atkinson; one was the Reverend Théodosius Longmoor. But the other—and it was the third person on whom his eyes were fixed with a hopeless feeling of impotent rage—the other was Phyllis herself. The two men were holding her in front of them, so that to fire was an impossibility, and Peterson was smiling out of the window with the utmost benevolence. Then they were past him, and he watched the red tail-lamp disappearing up the drive, while the gate was shut behind them. Another flashing spark stabbed the darkness: the circuit was complete again. And with a feeling of sick, helpless fury, Drummond realised that it had all been useless. He was exactly where he had been half an hour before, with the vital difference that the events of the last half-hour could not be repeated. He was caught: it was the finish. Somehow or other the poor girl must have blundered right into the car, and probably asked the occupants for help. She wouldn’t have known who they were; she’d just stopped the car on spec, and . . . .
He shook his fists impotently, and at that moment he heard a loud, powerful voice which he recognised at once speaking from the direction of the house.

"Unless Captain Drummond comes into the house within five minutes, I shall personally kill Mrs. Drummond."

And the voice was the voice of Carl Peterson.