CHAPTER XVII

IN WHICH A MURDERER IS MURDERED AT MAYBRICK HALL

“You appear to have a wonderful faculty for remaining alive, my young friend,” remarked Peterson two minutes later, gazing benevolently at Drummond over his clerical collar.

“Principally, Theo, my pet, because you’ve got such a wonderful faculty for making bloomers,” answered Drummond affably.

No trace of the impotent rage he had given way to in the garden showed in his face as he spoke; and yet, in all conscience, the situation was desperate enough. He was unarmed—his revolver had been removed from him as he entered the house—and behind his chair stood two men, each with the muzzle of a gun an inch off his neck. In another corner sat Phyllis, and behind her stood an armed man also. Every now and then his eyes stole round to her, and once he smiled reassuringly—an assurance he was far from feeling. But principally his eyes were fixed on the three men who were sitting at the table opposite him. In the centre was Carl Peterson, smoking the inevitable cigar; and, one on each side of him, sat Count Zadowa and the red-headed Russian Yulowski.

“You can’t imagine the pleasant surprise
it gave me," Peterson continued gently, "when your charming wife hailed my car. So unexpected: so delightful. And when I realised that you were running about in our grounds here instead of being drowned as that fool No. 10 told me over the telephone. . . . By the way, where is No. 10."

He turned snarling on the Russian, but it was one of the men behind Drummond’s chair who answered.

"He’s dead. This guy threw him on the live wires."

"Is that little Franz?" murmured Hugh Drummond, lighting a cigarette. "Yes—I regret to state that he and I had words, and my impression is that he has passed away. Do you mind standing a little farther away?" he continued, addressing the men behind him.

"You’re tickling the back of my neck, and it makes me go all goosey."

"Do you mean to say," said the Russian in his harsh voice, "that it was you and only you outside there?"

"You have guessed it, Adolph," answered Drummond, speaking mechanically. It had seemed to him, suddenly, that, unseen by the others, Phyllis was trying to convey some message. "Alone I did it, to say nothing of that squib-faced bird upstairs with the long arms. In fact, without wishing to exaggerate, I think the total bag is five—with dear old ‘pericoloso sporgersi’ as an ‘also ran.’"

What was she trying to make him understand?

And then suddenly she began to laugh
hysterically, and he half rose from his seat, only to sit down again abruptly as he felt the cold ring of a revolver pressed into the nape of his neck.

"Three and two make five," said Phyllis, half laughing and half crying, "and one makes six. I worked it out to-night, and it all came right."

She went on aimlessly for a while in the same strain, till the Russian swung round on her with a snarl, and told her to shut her mouth. He was talking in low tones to Peterson, and, with one searching look at Hughes, she relapsed into silence. There was no hysteria in that look, and his heart began to pound suddenly in his excitement. For 3256 Mayfair was the number of Peter Darrell's telephone, and she could only mean one thing—that she had got through to Peter before she stopped the car. And if that was so there was still hope, if only he could gain time. Time was the essential factor: time he must have somehow. And how was he to get it? Not by the quiver of an eyelid did the expression on his face change: he still smoked placidly on, looking with resigned boredom at the three men who were now conferring earnestly together. But his mind was racing madly, as he turned things over this way and that. Time: he must gain time.

If his supposition was right, Carl Peterson was in ignorance of the fact that a message had been got through. And in that lay the only chance. Just as in Bridge there comes a time when to win the game one must place
a certain card with one of the opponents and play accordingly—so that card must be placed in Peterson’s hand. If the placing has been done correctly you take your only chance of winning: if the placing is wrong you lose anyway. And so, starting with that as a foundation, he tried to work out the play of the hand. Peter Darrell knew, and Peterson was in ignorance of the fact.

First—how long did he want? Two hours at least: three if possible. To round up all the gang and get cars in the middle of the night would take time—two hours at the very least. Secondly—and there was the crux—how was he going to get such a respite? For this time he could not hope for another mistake. It was the end, and he knew it.

No trace of mercy showed in the faces of the three men opposite him. He caught occasional remarks, and after a while he realised what the matter under discussion was. Evidently the red-headed Russian was in favour of killing him violently, and at once—and it was Count Zadowa who was advocating caution, while Peterson sat between them listening impassively, with his eyes fixed on Drummond.

“Bayonet the pair of them,” snarled Yulowski at length, as if tired of arguing the point. “I’ll do the job if you’re too squeamish, and will bury ’em both with the rest of the bodies in the grounds somewhere. Who’s to know: who’s to find out?”

But Count Zadowa shook his head vigorously.

“That’s just where you’re wrong, my friend.
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No one would see you do it more willingly than I—but you’ve got to remember the rest of his gang.”

His voice died away to a whisper, and Drummond could only catch disjointed fragments.

“I know the Black Gang,” Zadowa was saying. “You don’t. And they know me.” Then he heard the word “accident” repeated several times, and at length Yulowski shrugged his shoulders and leaned back in his chair.

“Have it your own way,” he remarked. “I don’t care how they’re killed, as long as they are killed. If you think it’s necessary to pretend there has been an accident, we’ll have an accident. The only point is what sort of an accident.”

But Count Zadowa had apparently not got as far as that, and relapsed into silence. His powers of imagination were not sufficiently great to supply the necessary details and it was left to Carl Peterson to decide matters.

“Nothing is easier,” he remarked suavely, and his eyes were still fixed on Drummond. “We are discussing, my young friend,” he continued, raising his voice slightly, “the best way of getting rid of you and your charming wife. I regret that she must share your fate, but I see no way out of it. To keep her permanently about the premises would be too great an inconvenience; and since we can’t let her go without involving ourselves in unpleasant notoriety, I fear—as I said—that she must join you. My friend Yulowski wishes to bayonet you both, and bury you in the grounds. He has done a lot of that sort of
thing in his time, and I believe I am right in stating that his hand has not lost its cunning since leaving Russia. A little out of practice, perhaps: but the result is the same. On the other hand Count Zadowa, whom you know of old, quite rightly points out that there are the members of your ridiculous gang, who know about him, and might very easily find out about me. And when in a few days your motor-car is hoisted out of the water, and is traced by the registration number as being yours, he fears that not only may he find things very awkward, but that a certain amount of unenviable and undesirable limelight may be thrown on this part of the country, and incidentally on this house. You follow our difficulties so far?"

"With the utmost clarity, Theo," answered Drummond pleasantly.

"It’s always such a pleasure talking to you," continued Peterson. "You’re so unexpectedly quick on the uptake. Well then—to proceed. Though it will not interfere with me personally—as I leave England in four hours—it will interfere considerably with my plans if the police come poking their noses into this house. We like to hide our light under a bushel, Captain Drummond: we prefer to do our little bit unnoticed. So I feel sure that you will be only too ready to help us in any way you can, and fall in with my suggestion for your decease with goodwill. I have a very warm regard for you in so many ways, and I should hate to think that there was any bad blood between us at the end."
"Carl—my pet—you'll make me cry in a minute," said Drummond quietly. To all outward appearances he was in the same mocking vein as his principal enemy, but a little pulse was beginning to hammer in his throat, and his mouth felt strangely dry. He knew he was being played with as a mouse is played with by a cat, and it was all he could do to stop himself from demanding outright to know what was coming. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Phyllis sitting very white and still, but he didn't dare to look at her direct for fear he might break down. And then, still in the same tone, Peterson went on:

"I knew I could rely on you to meet me. I shall tell Irma when I see her, and she will be very touched by your kindness, Drummond—very touched. But to come back to the point. As my friend Zadowa most justly observed—we want an accident: a real good bona-fide accident, which will relieve the world of your presence and will bring no scorching glare of publicity upon this house or any of my confrères who remain in England. You may recall that that was my original idea, only you seem in the most extraordinary way to have escaped from being drowned. Still, as far as it goes, we have a very good foundation to build on. Your car—duly perceived by the gentleman of limited intelligence who works the bridge—went over the edge. You were duly perceived in it. Strangely enough, his eyesight must have been defective—or else he was so flustered by your amazing action that he was incapable of noticing everything at such
a moment. Because he actually failed to see that your charming wife was seated beside you. In the moment of panic when she realised you had fainted, she leant forward—doubtless to try and throw out the clutch. Yes”—his eyes, cold and expressionless, were turned momentarily on Phyllis—“I think that is what she must have done. That accounts for the not very intelligent gate-opener failing to see her. But that she was there is certain. Because, Captain Drummond, both bodies will be recovered from the river the day after tomorrow, shall we say? some two or three miles down-stream.”

“Your efforts at drowning have not been vastly successful up to date, Carl, have they?” said Drummond genially. “Do I understand that we are both to be taken out and held under the water, or are you going to use the bath here? That is to say”—and he glanced pointedly at Yulowski—“if such a commodity exists: Or are you again going to experiment with that dope of yours?”

“Wrong on all counts,” answered Peterson. “You are far too large and strong, my dear Drummond, to be drowned by such rudimentary methods. And it is more than likely that even if we attempted to do it, the fact that you struggled would be revealed in a post-mortem examination. And that would spoil everything, wouldn’t it? No longer would it appear to be an accident: Count Zadowa’s masterly arguments would all have been wasted. Why—I might as well agree at once to Yulowski’s suggestion of the bayonet. Pray
give me credit, my dear young friend, for a little more brains than that.”

“I do, Theo: I assure you I do,” said Drummond earnestly. “It’s only my terrible fear that you’ll again go and make a hash of it that inspires my remarks.”

“Thank you a thousand times,” murmured the clergyman gently. He was leaning forward, his elbows on the table—and for the first time Drummond understood something of the diabolical hatred which Peterson felt for him. He had never shown it before; he was far too big a man ever to betray his feeling unnecessarily. But now, as he sat facing him, gently rubbing his big white hands together, Drummond understood.

“Thank you a thousand times,” he repeated in the same gentle voice. “And since you are so concerned about the matter, I will tell you my plan in some detail. I need hardly say that any suggestions you make on any points that may strike you will receive my most careful attention. When the car crashed into the water it carried you and your wife with it. We have got as far as that, haven’t we? As it plunged downwards you—still unconscious from your dreadful and sudden fainting fit—were hurled out. Your wife, in a magnificent endeavour to save you, rose in her seat and was hurled out too. I think we can safely say that, don’t you, seeing that the not too intelligent gatekeeper could not have seen the car as it fell?”

“Go on,” said Drummond quietly.

“Interested, I hope,” murmured Peterson.
"But don’t hesitate to stop me if anything is at all obscure. I feel that you have a perfect right to suggest any small alterations you like. Well—to proceed. You were both hurled out as the car plunged into the water, and somewhat naturally you were both thrown forward. Head foremost, you will note, Drummond, you left the car—and your heads struck the stonework of the opposite pier with sickening force, just before you reached the water. In fact, a marked feature of the case, when this dreadful accident is reported in the papers, will be the force with which you both struck that pier. Your two heads were terribly battered. In fact, I have but little doubt that the coroner will decide, when your bodies are recovered some few miles down-stream—that you were not in reality drowned, but that the terrific impact on the stone pier killed you instantly. Do you think it’s sound up to date?"

"I think it’s damned unsound," remarked Drummond languidly. "If you propose to take me and endeavour to make my head impinge on a stone wall, someone is going to get a thick ear. Besides, the bridge isn’t open, and even your pal, the not too intelligent gate-keeper, might stick in his toes a bit. Of course"—he added hopefully—"you might say you were doing it for the movies. Tell him you’re Charlie Chaplin, but that you dressed in such a hurry you’ve forgotten your moustache."

The red-headed Russian was snarling venomously.
“Let me get at him, chief. He won’t try being funny again.”

“No. I shall be too occupied sprinkling myself with insect powder,” retorted Drummond vulgarly. “Why, you lousy brute, if you got at me, as you call it, and there wasn’t half a battalion of infantry holding guns in my head, I’d break your neck with one hand strapped behind my back.”

The Russian half rose to his feet, his teeth bared, and Peterson pulled him back into his chair.

“You’ll get your chance in a moment or two, Yulowski,” he remarked savagely. Then he turned once more on Drummond, and the genial look had vanished from his face. “Doubtless your humour appeals to some people; it does not to me. Moreover, I am in rather a hurry. I do not propose, Captain Drummond, to take you to the bridge and endeavour to make your head impinge on a wall, as you call it. There is another far simpler method of producing the same result. The impinging will take place in this house. As a soldier you should know the result of a blow over the head with the butt of a rifle. And I can assure you that there will be no bungling this time. Yulowski is an expert in such matters, and I shall stay personally to see that it is done. I think we can give a very creditable imitation of what would have happened had my little story been true, and to-morrow night—I see that it is getting a little too light now for the purpose—your two bodies will be carried over and dropped in the river. The length of time you will both have been
dead will be quite correct, within an hour or so—and everything will be most satisfactory for all concerned.”

Drummond passed his tongue over his lips, and despite himself his voice shook a little.

“Am I to understand,” he said after a moment, “that you propose to let that man butcher us here—in this house—with a rifle?”

“Just so,” answered Peterson. “That is exactly what you are to understand.”

“You are going to let him bash my wife over the head with a rifle butt?”

“I am going to order him to do so,” said Peterson mildly. “And very shortly at that. We must not have any mistakes over the length of time you’ve both been dead. I confess it sounds drastic, but I can assure you it will be quite sudden. Yulowski, as I told you, is an expert. He had a lot of experience in Russia.”

“You inhuman devil!” muttered Drummond dazedly. “You can do what you like to me, but for Heaven’s sake let her off.”

He was staring fascinated at the Russian, who had risen and crossed to a cupboard in the wall. There was something almost maniacal in the look on his face—the look of a savage, brute beast, confronted with the prey it desires.

“Impossible, my dear young friend,” murmured Peterson regretfully. “It affords me no pleasure to have her killed, but I have no alternative. To see you dead, I would cross two continents,” he snarled suddenly, “but”—and his voice became normal again—“only bitter necessity compels me to adopt such measures with Phyllis. You see, she knows
too much.” He whispered in Count Zadowa’s ear, who rose and left the room, to return shortly with half a dozen more men.

“Yes, she knows too much, and so I fear I cannot let her off. She would be able to tell such a lot of most inconvenient things to the police. This house is so admirably adapted for certain of our activities that it would be a world of pities to draw undesirable attention to it. Especially now that Count Zadowa has been compelled to leave his own office, owing entirely to your reprehensible curiosity.”

But Drummond was paying no attention to him. His eyes were fixed on the Russian, who had come back slowly into the centre of the room, carrying a rifle in his hand. It was an ordinary Russian service rifle, and a bayonet was fixed in position. Yulowski handled it lovingly, as he stood beside Peterson—and suddenly Count Zadowa turned white and began to tremble. To throw a bomb into a room and run for your life is one thing: to sit at a table in cold blood and witness a double execution is another. Even Peterson’s iron nerves seemed a little shaken, and his hand trembled as he removed his cigar. But there was no sign of relenting on his face; no sign of faltering in his voice as he spoke to the men who had just come into the room.

“In the interests of us all,” he remarked steadily, “I have decided that it is necessary to kill both the prisoners.” He made a sign, and Drummond, sitting almost paralysed in his chair, found both his arms gripped, with three men hanging on to each.
"The man," continued Peterson, "has been interfering with our work in England—the work of the Red International. He is the leader of the Black Gang, as you probably know; and as you probably do not know, it is he and his gang who have been responsible for the mysterious disappearance of some of our most trusted workers. Therefore with regard to him there can be no second thought: he deserves death, and he must die. With regard to the woman, the case is a little different. She has done us no active harm—but she is a member of the bourgeois class, and she is his wife. Moreover she knows too much. And so it becomes necessary that she should die too. The reason why I am adopting this method of putting them both out of the way, is—as I have already explained to all save you new-comers—that, when the bodies are discovered, the cause of death will appear to be accidental. They will both of them seem to the police to have gone over the edge of the bridge in the car, and hit their heads on the pier opposite. And to-morrow night you will carry the bodies to the river and drop them in. And that"—he resumed his cigar—"I think is all."

Yulowski handled his rifle lovingly, and once again his teeth showed in a wolfish grin.

"Which shall I take first, chief?" he said carelessly.

"The point is immaterial," returned Peterson. "I think perhaps the woman."

Drummond tried to speak and failed. His tongue was clinging to the roof of his mouth:
everything in the room was dancing before his eyes. Dimly he saw the red-headed brute Yulowski swinging his rifle to test it: dimly he saw Phyllis sitting bolt upright, with a calm, scornful expression on her face, while two men held her by the arms so that she could not move. And suddenly—he croaked horribly.

Then he saw Yulowski put down the rifle and listen intently for a moment.

“What’s the matter?” snapped Peterson irritably.

“Do you hear the different note to that dynamo?” said Yulowski.

“What the hell’s that got to do with it?” roared Peterson. “Get on with it, damn you—and attend to the dynamo afterwards.”

Yulowski nodded, and picked up his rifle again.

“The last time,” he said, turning on Drummond with a dreadful look of evil in his face, “that this rifle was used by me was in a cellar in Russia—on even more exalted people than you. I brought it specially with me as a memento, never thinking I should have the pleasure of using it again.”

He swung it over his head, and Drummond shut his eyes—to open them again a moment later, as the door was flung open and a man distraught with terror dashed in.

“The Black Gang!” he shouted wildly. “Hundreds of them—all round the house. They’ve cut the wires.”

With a fearful curse Peterson leaped to his feet, and the men holding Drummond, dumb-founded at the sudden turning of the tables,
let go his arms. Yulowski stood staring foolishly at the door, and what happened then was so quick that none of the stupefied onlookers raised a finger to prevent it.

With the howl of an enraged beast, Drummond hurled himself on the Russian—blind mad with fury. And when two seconds later a dozen black-cowled, black-hooded figures came swarming in through the door, for one instant they paused in sheer horror.

Pinned to the wall with his own bayonet, which stuck out six inches beyond his back was a red-headed, red-bearded man gibbering horribly in a strange language; whilst creeping towards a benevolent-looking clergyman, who crouched in a corner, was a man they scarce recognised as their leader, so appalling was the look of malignant fury on his face.

Carl Peterson was no coward. In the world in which he moved, there were many strange stories told of his iron nerve and his complete disregard of danger. Moreover Nature had endowed him with physical strength far above the average. But now, for perhaps the first time in his life, he knew the meaning of stark, abject terror.

The sinister men in black—members of that very gang he had come over to England to destroy—seemed to fill the room. Silently, as if they had been drilled to it, they disarmed everyone; then they stood round the walls—waiting. No one spoke: only the horrible imprecations of the dying Russian broke the silence, as he strove feebly to pull out the rifle and bayonet from his chest, which had fixed
him to the wall as a dead butterfly is fixed in a collection with a pin.

Peterson had a fleeting vision of a girl with white face and wide, staring eyes, beside whom were standing two of the motionless black figures as guards—the girl whom he had just sentenced to a dreadful and horrible death, and then his eyes came back again as if fascinated to the man who was coming towards him. He tried to shrink back farther into his corner, plucking with nerveless fingers at his clerical collar—while the sweat poured off his face in a stream. For there was no mercy in Hugh Drummond's eyes: no mercy in the great arms that hung loosely forward. And Peterson realised he deserved none.

And then it came. No word was spoken—Drummond was beyond speech. His hands shot out and Peterson felt himself drawn relentlessly towards the man he had planned to kill, not two minutes before. It was his turn now to wonder desperately if it was some hideous nightmare, even while he struggled impotently in his final frenzy with a man whose strength seemed equal to the strength of ten. He was choking: the grip on his throat was not human in its ferocity. There was a great roaring in his ears, and suddenly he ceased to struggle. The glare in Drummond's eyes hypnotised him, and for the only time in his life he gave up hope.

The room was spinning round: the silent black figures, the dying Yulowski, the girl—all seemed merged in one vast jumble of colour growing darker and darker, out of which one
thing and one thing only stood out clear and distinct on his dying consciousness—the blazing eyes of the man who was throttling him. And then, as he felt himself sinking into utter blackness, some dim sense less paralysed than the rest seemed to tell him that a change had taken place in the room. Something new had come into that whirling nightmare that spun round him: dimly he heard a voice—loud and agonised—a voice he recognised. It was a woman’s voice, and after a while the grip on his throat relaxed. He staggered back against the wall gasping and spluttering, and gradually the room ceased to whirl round—the iron bands ceased to press upon his heart and lungs.

It was Irma who stood there: Irma whose piteous cry had pierced through to his brain: Irma who had caused those awful hands to relax their grip just before it was too late. Little by little everything steadied down: he found he could see again—could hear. He still crouched shaking against the wall, but he had got a respite anyway—a breathing-space. And that was all that mattered for the moment—that and the fact that the madness was gone from Hugh Drummond’s eyes.

The black figures were still standing there motionless round the walls; the Russian was lolling forward—dead; Phyllis was lying back in her chair unconscious. But Peterson had eyes for none of these things: Count Zadowa shivering in a corner—the huddled group of his own men standing in the centre of the room he passed by without a glance. It was on Drummond his gaze was fixed: Drummond,
who stood facing Irma with an almost dazed expression on his face, whilst she pleaded with him in an agony of supplication.

"He ordered that man to brain my wife with a rifle butt," said Drummond hoarsely.

"And yet you ask for mercy."

He passed his hand two or three times over his forehead as Irma once again broke into wild pleadings; then he turned and stared at Peterson. She stopped at last, and still he stared at the gasping clergyman as if making up his mind. And, in truth, that was precisely what he was doing. Like most big men he was slow to anger, but once his temper was roused it did not cool easily. And never before in his life had he been in the grip of such cold, maniacal fury as had held him during the last few minutes. Right from the start had Peterson deceived him: from the very moment when he had entered his sitting-room at the Ritz. He had done his best to murder him, and not content with that he had given orders for Phyllis and him to be butchered in cold blood. If the Black Gang had not arrived—had they been half a minute later—it would have been over. Phyllis—his Phyllis—would have been killed by that arch-devil whom he had skewered to the wall with his own rifle. And as the thought took hold of him, his great fists clenched once more, and the madness again gleamed in his eyes. For Peterson was the real culprit: Peterson was the leader. To kill the servant and not the master was unjust. He swung round on the cowering clergyman and gripped him once again by the throat,
shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. He felt the girl Irma plucking feebly at his arm, but he took no notice. In his mind there was room for no thought save the fixed determination to rid the world for ever of this monstrous blackguard. And still the motionless black figures round the wall gave no sign, even when the girl rushed wildly from one to the other imploring their aid. They knew their leader, and though they knew not what had happened to cause his dreadful rage they trusted him utterly and implicitly. Whether it was lawful or not was beside the point: it was just or Hugh Drummond would not have done it. And so they watched and waited, while Drummond, his face blazing, forced the clergyman to his knees, and the girl Irma sank half-fainting by the table.

But once again Fate was to intervene on Peterson’s behalf, through the instrumentality of a woman. And mercifully for him the intervention came from the only woman—from the only human being—who could have influenced Drummond at that moment. It was Phyllis who opened her eyes suddenly, and, half-dazed still with the horror of the last few minutes, gazed round the room. She saw the huddled group of men in the centre: she saw the Russian lolling grotesquely forward supported on his own rifle: she saw the Black Gang silent and motionless like avenging judges round the walls. And then she saw her husband bending Carl Peterson’s neck farther and farther back, till at any moment it seemed as if it must crack.
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For a second she stared at Hugh’s face, and saw on it a look which she had never seen before—a look so terrible, that she gave a sharp, convulsive cry.

“Let him go, Hugh: let him go. Don’t do it.”

Her voice pierced his brain, though for a moment it made no impression on the muscles of his arms. A slightly bewildered look came into his eyes: he felt as a dog must feel who is called off his lawful prey by his master.

Let him go—let Carl Peterson go! That was what Phyllis was asking him to do—Phyllis who had stood at death’s door not five minutes before. Let him go! And suddenly the madness faded from his eyes: his hands relaxed their grip, and Carl Peterson slipped unconscious to the floor—unconscious but still breathing. He had let him go, and after a while he stepped back and glanced slowly round the room. His eyes lingered for a moment on the dead Russian, they travelled thoughtfully on along the line of black figures. And gradually a smile began to appear on his face—a smile which broadened into a grin.

“Perfectly sound advice, old thing,” he remarked at length. “Straight from the stable. I really believe I’d almost lost my temper.”