CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH THE HOME SECRETARY IS TAUGHT THE FOX-TROT

It was a week later. In Sir Bryan Johnstone’s office two men were seated, the features of one of whom, at any rate, were well known to the public. Sir Bryan encouraged no notoriety: the man in the street passed him by without recognition every time. In fact it is doubtful if many of the general public so much as knew his name. But with his companion it was different: as a member of several successive Cabinets, his face was almost as well known as one or two of the lesser lights in the film industry. And it is safe to say that never in the course of a life devoted to the peculiar vagaries of politics had his face worn such an expression of complete bewilderment.

“But it’s incredible, Johnstone,” he remarked for the fiftieth time. “Simply incredible.”

“Nevertheless, Sir John,” returned the other, “it is true. I have absolute indisputable proof of the whole thing. And if you may remember, I have long drawn the Government’s attention to the spread of these activities in England.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Sir John Haverton
a little testily, "but you, have never given us chapter and verse like this before."

"To be perfectly frank with you," answered Sir Bryan, "I didn't realise it fully myself until now. Had it not been for the Black Gang stumbling upon this house in Essex—Maybrick Hall—overpowering the owners and putting me on their track, much of this would never have come to light."

"But who are the members of this Black Gang?" demanded the Cabinet Minister.

Sir Bryan Johnstone gave an enigmatic smile.

"At the moment, perhaps," he murmured, "that point had better remain in abeyance. I may say that in the whole of my official career I have never received such a profound surprise as when I found out who the leader of the gang was. In due course, Sir John, it may be necessary to communicate to you his name; but in the meantime I suggest that we should concentrate on the information he has provided us with, and treat him as anonymous. I think you will agree that he has deserved well of his country."

"Damned well," grunted the other, with a smile. "He can have a seat in the Cabinet if this is his usual form."

"I hardly think," returned Sir Bryan, smiling even more enigmatically, "that he would help you very much in your proceedings though he might enliven them."

But the Cabinet Minister was once more engrossed in the report he was holding in his hand.
“Incredible,” he muttered again. “Incredible.”

“And yet, as I said before—the truth,” said the other. “That there is an organised and well-financed conspiracy to preach Bolshevism in England we have known for some time: how well organised it is we did not realise. But as you will see from that paper, there is not a single manufacturing town or city in Great Britain that has not got a branch of the organisation installed, which can if need be draw plentifully on funds from headquarters. Where those funds come from is at the present moment doubtful: in my own mind I have no doubt that Russia supplies the greater portion. You have in front of you there, Sir John”—he spoke with sudden passion—“the definite proofs of a gigantic attempt at world revolution on the Russian plan. You have in front of you there the proofs of the appalling spread of the Pioletarian Sunday Schools, with their abominable propaganda and their avowed attempt to convert the children who attend them to a creed whose beginning is destruction and whose end is chaotic anarchy. You have in front of you there the definite proofs that 80 per cent of the men engaged in this plot are not visionaries, swayed by some grandiloquent scheme of world reform—are not martyrs sacrificing their lives for what seems to them the good of the community—but criminals, and in many cases murderers. You have there before you the definite proofs that 80 per cent of these men think only of one thing—the lining of their own pockets, and to carry
out that object they are prepared to utterly destroy sound labour in this and every other country. It's not as difficult as it looks; it's not such a big proposition as it seems. Cancer is a small growth compared to the full body of the victim it kills: the cancer of one man's tongue will kill a crowd of a thousand. We're a free country, Sir John; but the time is coming when freedom as we understood it in the past will have to cease. We can't go on as the cesspit of Europe, sheltering microbes who infect us as soon as they are here. We want disinfecting: we want it badly. And then we want sound teaching, with the best representatives of the employers and the best representatives of the employed as the teachers. Otherwise you'll get this."

With his finger he flicked a paper towards the Cabinet Minister.

"'To teach the children the ideal of Revolution—that should be the primary aim of a Proletarian school.'

"Printed at Maybrick Hall," said Sir Bryan grimly. "And listen to this—a couple of the Ten Proletarian Maxims.

"'Thou shalt demand on behalf of your class the COMPLETE SURRENDER OF THE CAPITALIST CLASS.'

"And another:

"'Thou shalt teach REVOLUTION, for revolution means the abolition of the present political state, the end of Capitalism.'"

He gave a short laugh.

"That's what they're teaching the children. Destruction: destruction: destruction—and
not a syllable devoted to construction. What are they going to put in its place? They don't know—and they don't care—as long as they get paid for the teaching."

Sir John Haverton nodded thoughtfully.

"I must go into all this in detail," he remarked. "But in the meantime you have raised my curiosity most infernally about this Black Gang of yours. I seem to remember some extraordinary manifesto in the paper—something to do with that damned blackguard Latter, wasn't it?"

Sir Bryan leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"There are, one or two gaps I haven't filled in myself at the moment," he answered. "But I can tell you very briefly what led us to our discoveries at that house in Essex of which I spoke to you—Maybrick Hall. About six days ago I received a typewritten communication of a similar type to one or two which I had seen before. A certain defect in the typewriter made it clear that the source was the same, and that source was the leader of the Black Gang. Here is the communication."

He opened a drawer in his desk, and passed a sheet of paper across to the Cabinet Minister.

"If," it ran, "jolly old McIver will take his morning constitutional to Maybrick Hall in Essex, he will find much to interest him in that delightful and rural spot. Many specimens, both dead and alive, will be found there, all in a splendid state of preservation. He will also find a great many interesting devices in the house. Above all, let him be careful of an
elderly clergyman of beneficent aspect, whose beauty is only marred by a stiff and somewhat swollen neck, accompanied by a charming lady who answers to the name of Janet. They form the peerless gems of the collection, and were on the point of leaving the country with the enclosed packet which I removed from them for safe keeping. My modesty forbids me to tell an unmarried man like you in what portion of dear Janet’s garments this little bag was found, but there’s no harm in your guessing.”

“What the devil?” spluttered Sir John. “Is it a practical joke?”

“Far from it,” answered the other. “Read to the end.”

“After McIver has done this little job,” Sir John read out, “he might like a trip to the North. There was an uninhabited island off the West coast of Mull, which is uninhabited no longer. He may have everything he finds there, with my love.—The leader of the Black Gang.”

Sir John laid down the paper and stared at the Director of Criminal Investigation.

“Is this the rambling of a partially diseased intellect?” he inquired with mild sarcasm.

“Nothing of the sort,” returned the other shortly. “McIver and ten plain-clothes men went immediately to Maybrick Hall. And they found it a very peculiar place. There were some fifteen men there—trussed up like so many fowls, and alive. They were laid flat in a row in the hall.

“Enthroned in state, in two chairs at the end,
and also trussed hand and foot, were the beneficent clergyman and Miss Janet. So much for the living ones, with the exception of an Italian, who was found peacefully sleeping upstairs, with his right wrist padlocked to the wall by a long chain. I’ve mentioned him last, because he was destined to play a very important part in the matter.” He frowned suddenly. “A very important part, confound him,” he repeated. “However, we will now pass to the other specimens. In the grounds were discovered—“a dead fowl, a dead fox, a dead hound the size of a calf—and three dead men.”

Sir John ejaculated explosively, sitting up in his chair.

“They had all died from the same cause,” continued the other imperturbably—“electrocution. But that was nothing compared to what they found inside. In an upstairs room was a dreadful-looking specimen more like an ape than a man, whose neck was broken. In addition, the main artery of his left arm had been severed with a knife. And even that was mild to what they found downstairs. Supported against the wall was a red-headed man stone dead. A bayonet fixed to a rifle had been driven clean through his chest, and stuck six inches into the wall behind him. And on that the body was supported.”

“Good heavens!” said Sir John, aghast. “Who had done it?”

“The leader of the Black Gang had done it all, fighting desperately for his own life and that of his wife. One of the men lashed up in
the hall turned King’s Evidence and told us everything. I’m not going to weary you with the entire story, because you wouldn’t believe it. This man had heard everything: had been present through it all. He heard how this leader—a man of gigantic strength—had thrown his wife over the high live-wire fence, just as the hound was on top of them, and the hound dashing after her had electrocuted itself. He heard how the girl, rushing blindly through the night in an unknown country, had stumbled by luck on the local post office, and managed to get a telephone call through to London, where she found the rest of the gang assembled and waiting—their suspicions aroused over some message received that evening from the Ritz. Then she left the post office and was wandering aimlessly along the road, when a car pulled up suddenly in front of her. Inside was a clergyman accompanied by another man—not either of whom she recognised. They offered her a lift, and the next thing she knew was that she’d been trapped again, and was back at Maybrick Hall. So much this man heard: the rest he saw. The leader of the Black Gang and his wife were sentenced to death by the clergyman. . . . Clergyman!” Sir Bryan shook his fist in the air. “I’d give a year’s screw to have laid my hands on that clergyman.”

“He escaped?” cried the other.

“All in due course,” said Sir Bryan. “They were sentenced to death by having their brains bashed out with the butt of a rifle—after which they were to be thrown in the river. It was to
be made to appear an accident. And the man who was to do it was a Russian called Yulowski—one of the men who butchered the Russian Royal family.... A devil of the most inhuman description. He literally had the rifle raised to kill the girl, when the Black Gang, having cut the wire fence, arrived in the nick of time. And it was then that the leader of that gang, who had thought he was on the point of seeing his wife's brains dashed out, took advantage of the utter confusion and sprang on the Russian with a roar of rage. The man who told us stated that he had never dreamed such a blow was possible as the rifle thrust which pierced clean through the Russian. It split him like a rotten cabbage, and he died in three minutes."

"But, my dear fellow," spluttered the Cabinet Minister, "you can't expect me to believe all this. You're pulling my leg."

"Never farther from it in my life, Haverton," said the other. "I admit it seems a bit over the odds, but every word I've told you is gospel. To return to the discoveries. McIver found that the house was the headquarters of a vast criminal organisation. There were schemes of the most fantastic descriptions cut and dried in every detail. Some of them were stupid; some were not. I have them all here. This one"—he glanced through some papers on his desk—"concerns the blowing of a large gap in one of the retaining walls of the big reservoir at Staines. This one concerns a perfectly-thought-out plot on your life when you go to Beauchamp Hall next week.
You were to be found dead in your railway carriage."

"What!" roared Sir John, springing to his feet.

"It would very likely have failed," said Sir Bryan calmly, "but they would have tried again. They don't like you or your views at all—these gentlemen. But those are the least important. From time immemorial wild, fanatical youths have done similar things: the danger was far greater and more subtle. And perhaps the most dangerous activity of all was what I have spoken about already—Maybrick Hall was the headquarters of these poisonous Proletarian Sunday Schools. But in addition to that there was forgery going on there on a big scale: money is necessary for their activities. There were also long lists of their agents in different parts of the country, and detailed instructions for fomenting industrial unrest. But you have it all there—you can read it at your leisure for yourself. Particularly I commend to your notice, the series of pamphlets on Ireland, and the methods suggested for promoting discord between England and France, and England and America."

Sir Bryan lit a cigarette.

"To return to the personal side of it. McIver, engrossed in his search, paid very little attention to the row of mummies in the hall. They certainly seemed extraordinarily safe, and one can hardly blame him. But the fact remains that, at some period during the morning, the Italian, who, if you remember, was padlocked in a bedroom upstairs, escaped.
How I can’t tell you: he must have had a key in his pocket. They found the padlock open, and the room empty. And going downstairs they found the chairs recently occupied by the clergyman and Miss Janet empty also. Moreover from that moment no trace of any of them has been found. It is as if the earth had opened and swallowed them. Which brings us to the packet enclosed with the letter from the leader of the Black Gang."

He crossed to a safe and took out the little chamois leather bag of diamonds.

"Nice stones," he remarked quietly. "Worth literally a King’s ransom. The pink one is part of the Russian crown jewels: the remainder belonged to the Grand Duke Georgius, who was murdered by the Bolshevists. His son, who had these in his possession, died ten days ago of an overdose of a sleeping-draught in Amsterdam. At least that is what I understood until I received these. Now I am not so sure. I would go further, and say I am quite sure that even if he did die of an overdose, it was administered by someone else. And it was administered by the beneficent clergyman calling himself the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor—the most amazing international criminal of this or any other age—the man who, with Miss Janet and the Italian, has vanished into thin air, right under McIver’s nose."

"And you mean to say this man has been in England and you haven’t laid him by the heels?" said Sir John incredulously.

"Unfortunately that is what I mean,"
answered the other. "The police of four continents know about him, but that's a very different thing from proof. This time we had proof—these diamonds: and the man has vanished—utterly and completely. He is the master mind who controls and directs, but very rarely actually does anything himself. That's why he's so devilishly difficult to catch. But we'll do it sooner or later."

The Cabinet Minister was once more studying the typewritten communication from the leader of the Black Gang.

"It's the most astounding affair, this, Johnston," he said at length. "Most astounding. And what's all this about the island off the coast of Mull?"

Sir Bryan laughed.

"Not the least astounding part of the whole show, I assure you. But for you to understand it better I must go back two or three months, to the time when we first became aware of the existence of the Black Gang. A series of very strange disappearances were taking place: men were being spirited away, without leaving a trace behind them. Of course we knew about it, but in view of the fact that our assistance was never asked to find them, and still more in view of the fact that in every case they were people whose room we preferred to their company, we lay low and said nothing.

From unofficial inquiries I had carried out we came to the conclusion that this mysterious Black Gang was a reality, and that, further, it was intimately connected with these disap-
pearances. But we also came to the conclusion that the ideals and objects of this gang were in every way desirable. Such a thing, of course, could not be admitted officially: the abduction of anyone is a criminal offence. But we came to the conclusion that the Black Gang was undoubtedly an extremely powerful and ably led organisation whose object was simply and solely to fight the Red element in England. The means they adopted were undoubtedly illegal—but the results were excellent. Whenever a man appeared preaching Bolshevism, after a few days he simply disappeared. In short, a reign of terror was established amongst the terrorists. And it was to put that right I have no doubt that the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor arrived in this country.”

Sir Bryan thoughtfully lit another cigarette.

“To return to the island. McIver went there, and after some little difficulty located it, out of the twenty or thirty to which the description might apply. He found it far from uninhabited, just as that letter says. He found it occupied by some fifty or sixty rabid anarchists—the gentlemen who had so mysteriously disappeared—who were presided over by twenty large demobilised soldiers commanded by an ex-sergeant-major of the Guards. The sixty frenzied anarchists, he gathered, were running a state on communist lines, as interpreted by the ex-sergeant-major. And the interpretation moved even McIver to tears of laughter. It appeared that once every three hours they were all drawn up in a row, and the
sergeant-major, with a voice like a bull, would bellow:

"'Should the ruling classes have money?'

"Then they answered in unison—'No.'

"'Should anyone have money?' Again they answered 'No.'

"'Should everyone work for the common good for love?' 'Yes.'

"Whereat he would roar: 'Well, in this 'ere island there ain't no ruling classes, and there ain't no money, and there's dam' little love, so go and plant more potatoes, you lopped sons of Beelzebub.'

"At which point the parade broke up in disorder."

Sir John was shaking helplessly.

"This is a jest, Johnstone. You're joking."

"I'm not," answered the other. "But I think you'll admit that the man who started the whole show—the leader of the Black Gang—is a humorist, to put it mildly, who cannot well be spared."

"My dear fellow, as I said before, the Cabinet is the only place for him. If only he'd export two or three of my colleagues to this island and let 'em plant potatoes I'd take off my hat to him. Tell me—do I know him?"

Sir Bryan smiled.

"I'm not certain: you may. But the point, Haverton, is this. We must take cognisance of the whole thing, if we acknowledge it at all. Therefore shall we assume that everything I have been telling you is a fairy story: that the Black Gang is non-existent—I
may say that it will be shortly—and that what has already appeared in the papers is just a hoax by some irresponsible person? Unless we do that there will be a cause célèbre fought out on class prejudice—a most injudicious thing at the present moment. I may say that the island is shut down, and the sixty pioneers have departed to other countries. Also quite a number of those agents whose names are on the list you have have left our shores during the past few days. It is merely up to us to see that they don’t come back. But nothing has come out in the papers; and I don’t want anything to come out either.”

He paused suddenly, as a cheerful voice was heard in the office outside.

“Ah! here is one Captain Drummond, whom I asked to come round this morning,” he continued, with a faint smile. “I wonder if you know him.”

“Drummond?” repeated the other. “Is he a vast fellow with an ugly face?”

“That’s the man,” said Sir Bryan.

“I’ve seen him at his aunt’s—old Lady Mcltrose. She says he’s the biggest fool in London.”

Sir Bryan’s smile grew more pronounced as the door opened and Hugh came in.

“Morning, Tum-tum,” he boomed genially.

“How’s the liver and all that?”

“Morning, Hugh. Do you know Sir John Haverton?”

“Morning, Sir John. Jolly old Cabinet merry and bright? Or did you all go down on Purple Polly at Goodwood yesterday?”
Sir John rose a little grimly.

"We have other things to do besides backing horses, Captain Drummond. I think we have met at Lady McItrrose's house, haven't we?"

"More than 'likely," said Hugh affably. "I don't often dine there: she ropes in such a ghastly crowd of bores, don't you know."

"I feel sure, Captain Drummond, that you're an admirable judge." Sir John turned to Sir Bryan Johnstone and held out his hand.

"Well, I must be off. Good-morning, Johnstone—and you've thoroughly roused my curiosity; I'd very much like to know who the gentleman is whom we've been discussing. And in the meantime I'll look through these papers and let you know my decision in due course."

He bustled out of the office, and Hugh sank into a chair with a sigh of relief.

"The old boy's clothes seem full of body this morning, Tum-tum," he remarked as the door closed. "Indigestion—or don't the elastic-sided boots fit?"

"Do you know what we have been discussing, Hugh?" said the other quietly.

"Not an earthly, old man. Was it that new one about the girl in the grocer's shop?"

"We've been discussing the leader of the Black Gang," said Sir Bryan, with his eyes fixed on the man sprawling in the chair opposite.

Not by the twitch of a muscle did Drummond's face change: he seemed engrossed in the task of selecting a cigarette.
IN WHICH THE HOME SECRETARY

"You've been in Deauville, haven't you, Hugh—the last few days?"
"Quite right, old man. All among the fairies."
"You don't know that a burglary has taken place at your house in London?"
"A burglary!" Drummond sat up with a jerk. "Why the deuce hasn't Denny told me?"
"A very small one," said Sir Bryan, "committed by myself, and perhaps he doesn't know. I took—your typewriter."

For a few moments Hugh Drummond stared at him in silence: then his lips began to twitch.
"I see," he said at length. "I meant to have that defective 's' repaired."
"You took me in, old boy," continued Sir Bryan, "utterly and absolutely. If it hadn't been for one of the men at Maybrick Hall turning King's evidence, I don't believe I should have found out now."
"Well, what are you going to do about it?" asked Drummond after a pause.
"Nothing. I was discussing the matter with Sir John this morning, and we both agreed that you either deserved penal servitude or a seat in the Cabinet. And since neither course commends itself to us, we have decided to do nothing. There are reasons, which you will appreciate, against any publicity at the moment. But Hugh, the Black Gang must cease."

Drummond nodded.
"Carried, nem. con., Tum-tum. It shall automatically dissolve to-day."
“And further,” continued Sir Bryan, “will you relieve my curiosity and tell me what sent Charles Latter mad?”

“I did,” said Drummond grimly, “as I told that ass McIver over a cocktail at the Regency. He was plotting to blow up three thousand men’s employment, Tum-tum, with gun-cotton. It was at his instigation that four men were killed in Manchester as the result of another outrage. So I lashed him to his bed, and underneath him I put what he thought was a slab of gun-cotton with fuse attached. It wasn’t gun-cotton: it was wood. And he went—that mad.” He paused for a moment, and then continued. “Now, one for you. Why did you let Carl Peterson escape? I nearly killed him that night, after I’d bayoneted the Russian.”

“How did you know he had escaped?” demanded Sir Bryan.

Hugh felt in his pocket and produced a note. “Read it,” he said, passing it across the desk.

“It was a pity you forgot that there might be another key to the padlock, Captain Drummond,” it ran. “And Giuseppi is an old friend of mine. I quite enjoyed our single.”

Sir Bryan returned the note without a word, and Drummond replaced it in his pocket.

“That’s twice,” he said quietly, and suddenly the Director of Criminal Investigation, than whom no shrewder judge of men lived, saw and understood the real Drummond below the surface of inanity—the real Drummond, cool,
resourceful, and inflexible of will—the real Drummond who was capable of organising and carrying through anything and everything once he had set his mind to it.

"That's twice," he repeated, still in the same quiet tone. "Next time—I win."

"But no more Black Gang, Hugh," said the other warningly.

Drummond waved a huge hand. "I have spoken, Tum-tum. A rose by any other name, perhaps—but no more Black Gang."

He rose and grinned at his friend.

"It's d.euced good of you, old man, and all that..."

The eyes of the two men met.

"If it was found out, I should be looking for another job," remarked Sir Bryan dryly. "And perhaps I should not get the two thousand pounds which I understand the widow of the late lamented Ginger Martin has received anonymously."

"Shut up," said Drummond awkwardly.

"Delighted, old man," returned the other. "But the police in that district are demanding a rise of pay. She has been drunk and disorderly five times in the last week."

To those strong-minded individuals who habitually read the entrancing chit-chat of Mrs. Tattle in The Daily Observer, there appeared the following morning a delightful description of the last big fancy-dress ball of the season held at the Albert Hall the preceding night. Much of it may be passed over
as unworthy of perpetuation, but the concluding paragraph had its points of interest.

"Half-way through the evening," she wrote in her breezy way, "just as I was consuming an ice in one hand with the Duchess of Sussex, and nibbling the last of the asparagus in the other with the Princess of Montevideo, tastefully disguised as an umbrella stand, we were treated to the thrill of the evening. It seemed as if suddenly there sprang up all round the room a mass of mysterious figures clothed from head to foot in black. The dear Princess grew quite hysterical, and began to wonder if it was a 'hold up' as she so graphically described it. In fact, for safety, she secreted the glass-headed parasol—the only remaining heirloom of the Royal House—and which formed a prominent part of her costume, behind a neighbouring palm. Whispers of the mysterious Black Gang were heard on all sides, but we were soon reassured. Belovedst, they all carried champagne bottles! Wasn't it too, too thrilling!! And after a while they all formed up in a row, and at a word from the leader—a huge man, my dears, puffedly 'uge—they discharged the corks in a volley at one of the boxes, which sheltered no less than two celebrities—Sir Bryan Johnstone, the chief of all the policemen, and Sir John Haverton, the Home Secretary. It is rumoured that one of the corks became embedded in Sir John's right eye—but rumour is a lying jade, is not she? Anyway loud sounds of revelry and mirth were heard proceeding from the box, and going a little later to powder my nose I distinctly saw Sir John
being taught the intricacies of the fox-trot by the huge man in the passage. Presumably the cork had by then been removed from his eye, but one never knows, does one? Anything can happen at an Albert Hall ball, especially at the end of the season.”