CHAPTER V

IN WHICH CHARLES LATTER, M.P., GOES MAD

Drummond arrived at Drayton House just as the house-party was sitting down to tea in the hall. A rapid survey of the guests as the footman helped him out of his coat convinced him that, with the exception of Latter, he didn’t know a soul: a second glance indicated that he could contemplate the fact with equanimity. They were a stodgy-looking crowd, and after a brief look he turned his attention to his hostess.

“Where is Lady Manton?” he asked the footman.

“Pouring out tea, sir,” returned the man surprised.

“Great Scott!” said Drummond, aghast. “I’ve come to the wrong house.”

“The wrong house, sir?” echoed the footman, and the sound of their voices made Lady Manton look up.

In an instant that astute woman spotted what had happened. The writer of the strange letter she had received at lunch-time had arrived, and had realised his mistake. Moreover, this was the moment for which she had been waiting ever since, and now to add joy
to joy it had occurred when her whole party was assembled to hear every word of her conversation with Drummond. With suitable gratitude she realised that such opportunities are rare.

With a charming smile she advanced towards him, as he stood hesitating by the door.

"Mr. Drummond?" she inquired.

"Yes," he murmured, with a puzzled frown.

"But—but I seem to have made some absurd mistake."

She laughed, and drew him into the hall.

"A perfectly natural one, I assure you," she replied, speaking so that her guests could hear. "It must have been my sister-in-law that you met at Wiltshire Towers. My husband was not very fit at the time and so I had to refuse the Duchess's invitation." She was handing him a cup of tea as she spoke. "But, of course, I know your cousin, Lord Staveley, well. So we really know one another after all, don't we?"

"Charming of you to put it that way, Lady Manton," answered Drummond, with his infectious grin. "At the same time I feel a bit of an interloper—what! Sort of case of fools toddling in where angels fear to tread."

"A somewhat infelicitous quotation," remarked an unctuous-looking man with side whiskers, deprecatingly.

"Catches you too, does it, old bird?" boomed Hugh, putting down his empty cup.

"It was the second part of your quotation that I was alluding to," returned the other acidly, when Lady Manton intervened.
"Of course, Mr. Drummond, my husband and I insist on your remaining with us until you have completed your business in Sheffield."

"Extraordinarily kind of you both, Lady Manton," answered Hugh.

"How long do you think you will be?"

"Three or four days. Perhaps a little more." As he spoke he looked quite casually at Latter. For some minutes that worthy pillar of Parliament had been staring at him with a puzzled frown: now he gave a slight start as recognition came to him. This was the enormous individual who had snored in Sir Bryan Johnstone's office the previous afternoon. Evidently somebody connected with the police, reflected Mr. Latter, and glancing at Drummond's vast size he began to feel more reassured than he had for some time. A comforting sort of individual to have about the premises in the event of a brawl: good man—Sir Bryan. This man looked large enough to cope even with that monstrous black apparition, the thought of which still brought a shudder to his spine.

Drummond was still looking at him, but there was no trace of recognition in his eyes. Evidently they were to meet as strangers before the house party: quite right too, when some of the guests themselves might even be members of this vile gang.

"It depends on circumstances outside my control," Drummond was saying. "But if you can do with me for a few days . . ."

"As long as you like, Mr. Drummond,"
answered Lady Manton. "And now let me introduce you to my guests."

It was not until just before dinner that Mr. Latter had an opportunity of a few private words with Drummond. They met in the hall, and for the moment no one else was within earshot.

"You were in Sir Bryan Johnstone's office yesterday," said the M.P. hoarsely. "Are you connected with the police?"

"Intimately," answered Hugh. "Even now, Mr. Latter, you are completely surrounded by devoted men who are watching and guarding you."

A gratified smile spread over the other's face, though Drummond's remained absolutely expressionless.

"And how did you get here, Mr. Drummond?"

"By car," returned Hugh gravely.

"I mean into the house party," said Mr. Latter stiffly.

"Ah!" Hugh looked mysterious. "That is between you and me, Mr. Latter."

"Quite: quite. I am discretion itself."

"Until two hours ago I thought I was the biggest liar in the world: now I know I'm not. Our hostess has me beat to a frazzle."

"What on earth are you talking about?" cried Latter, amazed.

"There are wheels within wheels, Mr. Latter," continued Hugh still more mysteriously.

"A network of intrigue surrounds us. But do
not be afraid. My orders are never to leave your side."

"Good God, Mr. Drummond, do you mean to say . . . ?"

"I mean to say nothing. Only this one thing I will mention." He laid an impressive hand on Latter's arm. "Be very careful what you say to that man with the mutton-chop whiskers and the face like a sheep."

And the startled M.P. was too occupied staring suspiciously at the worthy Sheffield magnate and pillar of nonconformity who had just descended the stairs with his hostess to notice a sudden peculiar shaking in Drummond's shoulders as he turned away.

. . . . . . . .

Mr. Charles Latter was not a pleasant specimen of humanity even at the best of times, and that evening he was not at his best. He was frightened to the core of his rotten little soul, and when a constitutional coward is frightened the result is not pretty. His conversational efforts at dinner would have shamed a boy of ten, and though he made one or two feeble efforts to pull himself together, it was no good. Try as he would his mind kept reverting to his own position. Over and over again he went on weighing up the points of the case until his brain was whirling. He tried to make out a mental balance sheet where the stock was represented by his own personal safety, but there was always that one unknown factor which he came up against—the real power of this mysterious gang.
Coming up in the train he had decided to curtail his visit as much as possible. He would carry through what he had been told to do, and then, having pocketed his thousand, he would leave the country for a few months. By that time the police should have settled matters. And he had been very lucky. It had proved easy to find the man Delmorlick, and once he had been found, the other more serious matter had proved easy too. Delmorlick had arranged everything, and had brought three other men to meet him in a private room at one of the smaller hotels.

Like all the Count's schemes, every detail was perfect, and once or twice exclamations of amazement interrupted him as he read on. Every possible eventuality was legislated for, and by the time he had finished reading Delmorlick’s eyes were glowing with the enthusiasm of a fanatic.

"Magnificent," he had cried, rising and going to the window. "Another nail in the coffin of Capital. And, by heaven! a big one."

He had stood there, his head covered with a shock of untidy hair, staring with sombre eyes at the street below. And beside him had stood one of the other men. After a while Latter joined them, and he too for a moment had looked down into the street where little knots of men lounged round doorways with their hands in their pockets, and the apathy of despair on their faces. A few women here and there mingled with them, but there was no laughing or jesting—only the sullenness of lost hope. The hope that had once been theirs
of work and plenty was dead; there was nothing for them to do—they were just units in the vast army of unemployed. Occasionally a man better dressed and more prosperous than the others would detach himself from one group and go to another, where he would hold forth long and earnestly. And his listeners would nod their heads vigorously or laugh sheepishly as he passed on.

For a few moments Delmorlick had watched in silence. Then with a grave earnestness in his voice he had turned to Latter.

"We shall win, Mr. Latter, I tell you. That," with a lean forefinger he pointed to the man outside, "is going on all over England, Scotland, and Ireland. And the fools in London prate of economic laws and inflated currencies. What does an abstract cause matter to those men; they want food."

He had glanced at Delmorlick, to find the eyes of the other man fixed on him gravely. He had hardly noticed it at the time—he had been too anxious to get away; now, as he sat at dinner, he found strangely enough that it was the other man's face which seemed to have made the biggest impression on his mind. A new arrival in the place, so Delmorlick had told him—but red-hot for the cause of freedom and anarchy.

He made some vague remark to his neighbour and once more relapsed into moody silence. So far, so good; his job was done—he could leave to-morrow. He would have left that afternoon but for the fact that he had sent his baggage up to Drayton House, and it
would have looked strange. But he had already arranged for a wire to be sent to him from London the following morning, and for the night—well, there were Drummond and the police. Decidedly, on points he appeared to be in a winning position—quite a comfortable position.—And yet—that unknown factor.... Still, there was always Drummond; the only trouble was that he couldn't quite place him. What on earth had he meant before dinner? He glanced across the table at him now: he was eating salted almonds and making love to his hostess.

"A fool," reflected Mr. Latter, "but a powerful fool. If it was necessary, he'd swallow anything I told him."

And so, towards the end of dinner, aided possibly by his host's very excellent vintage port, Mr. Charles Latter had more or less soothed his fears. Surely he was safe in the house, and nothing would induce him to leave it until he went to the station next morning. No thought of the abominable crime he had planned only that afternoon disturbed his equanimity; as has been said, he was not a pleasant specimen of humanity.

Charles Latter was unmoral rather than immoral: he was a constitutional coward with a strong liking for underhand intrigue, and he was utterly and entirely selfish. In his way he was ambitious: he wanted power, but, though in many respects he was distinctly able, he lacked that essential factor—the ability to work for it. He hated work: he wanted easy results. And to obtain lasting results is not
easy, as Mr. Latter gradually discovered. A capability for making flashy speeches covered with a veneer of cleverness is an undoubted asset, but it is an asset the value of which has been gauged to a nicety by the men who count. And so as time went on, and the epoch-making day when he had been returned to Parliament faded into the past, Mr. Latter realised himself for what he was—a thing of no account. And the realisation was as gall and wormwood to his soul. It is a realisation which comes to many men, and it takes them different ways. Some become resigned—some make new and even more futile efforts: some see the humour of it, and some don’t. Mr. Latter didn’t: he became spiteful. And a spiteful coward is a nasty thing.

It was just about that time that he met Count Zadowa. It was at dinner at a friend’s house, and after the ladies had left he found himself sitting next to the hunchback with the strange, piercing eyes. He wasn’t conscious of having said very much: he would have been amazed had he been told that within ten minutes this charming foreigner had read his unpleasant little mind like a book, and had reached a certain and quite definite decision. In fact, looking back on the past few months, Mr. Latter was at a loss to account as to how things had reached their present pass. Had he been told when he stood for Parliament; flaunting all the old hackneyed formulae, that within two years he would be secretly engaged in red-hot Communist work, he would have laughed the idea to scorn. Anarchy, too: a
nasty word, but the only one that fitted the bomb outrage in Manchester, which he had himself organised. Sometimes in the night, he used to wake and lie sweating as he thought of that episode...

And gradually it had become worse and worse. Little by little the charming Count Zadowa, realising that Mr. Latter possessed just those gifts which he could utilise to advantage, had ceased to be charming. There were many advantages in having a Member of Parliament as chief liaison officer.

There had been that first small slip when he signed a receipt for money paid him to address a revolutionary meeting in South Wales during the coal strike. And the receipt specified the service rendered. An unpleasant document in view of the fact that his principal supporters in his constituency were coal-owners. And after that the descent had been rapid.

Not that even now Mr. Latter felt any twinges of conscience: all he felt was occasional twinges of fear that he might be found out. He was running with the hare and hunting with the hounds with a vengeance, and at times his cowardly little soul grew sick within him. And then, like a dreaded bolt from the blue, had come the letter of warning from the Black Gang.

Anyway, he reflected, as he turned out his light after getting into bed that night, the police knew nothing of his double life. They were all round him, and there was this big fool in the house. ... For a moment his heart
stopped beating: was it his imagination or was that the figure of a man standing at the foot of the bed?

The sweat poured off his forehead as he tried to speak: then he sat up in bed, plucking with trembling hands at the collar of his pyjamas. Still the shape stood motionless: he could swear there was something there now—he could see it outlined against the dim light of the window. He reached out fearfully for the switch: fumbled a little, and then with a click the light went on. His sudden scream of fear died half-strangled in his throat: a livid anger took the place of terror. Leaning over the foot of the bed and regarding him with solicitous interest, lounged Hugh Drummond.

"All tucked up and comfy, old bean," cried Drummond cheerfully. "Bed socks full of feet and all that sort of thing?"

"How dare you," spluttered Latter, "how dare you come into my room like this. . . ."

"Tush, tush," murmured Drummond, "don’t forget my orders, old Latter, my lad. To watch over you as a crooning mother crooneth over the last batch of twins. By the way, my boy, you skimmed your teeth pretty badly tonight. You’ll have to do better to-morrow. Most of your molars must be sitting up and begging for Kolynomos if that’s your normal effort."

"Do you mean to tell me that you were in here while I was undressing," said Latter angrily. "You exceed your instructions, sir: and I shall report your unwarrantable im-
pertinence to Sir Bryan Johnstone when I return to London."

"Exactly, Mr. Latter. But when will you return to London?" Drummond regarded him dispassionately. "To put some, if not all, of the cards on the table, the anonymous letter of warning which you received was not quite so anonymous as you would have liked. In other words, you know exactly whom it came from."

"I don't," replied the other. "I know that it came from an abominable gang who have been committing a series of outrages lately. And that is why I applied for police protection."

"Quite so, Mr. Latter. And as—er—Fate would have it, I am here to help carry out that rôle."

"What did you mean when you gave me that warning before dinner? That man is one of the leading citizens of Sheffield."

"That was just a little jest, Mr. Latter, to amuse you during the evening. The danger does not lie there."

"Where does it lie?"

"Probably where you least expect it," returned Drummond with an enigmatic smile.

"I shall be going to-morrow," said Latter with attempted nonchalance. "Until then I rely on you."

"Precisely," murmured Drummond. "So you have completed your business here quicker than you anticipated."

"Yes. To be exact, this afternoon before you arrived."
“And was that the business which brought you to Sheffield?”

“Principally. Though I really don’t understand this catechism, Mr. Drummond. And now I wish to go to sleep. . . .”

“I’m afraid you can’t, Mr. Latter. Not quite yet.” For a moment or two Charles Latter stared at the imperturbable face at the foot of his bed: it seemed to him that a strange tension was creeping into the conversation—a something he could not place which made him vaguely alarmed.

“Do you think this mysterious Black Gang would approve of your business this afternoon?” asked Drummond quietly.

Mr. Latter started violently.

“How should I know of what the scoundrels would approve?” he cried angrily. “And anyway, they can know nothing about it.”

“You feel quite confident in Mr. Delmorlick’s discretion with regard to the friends he selects?”

And now a pulse was beginning to hammer in Mr. Latter’s throat, and his voice when he spoke was thick and unnatural.

“How do you know anything about Delmorlick?”

Drummond smiled. “May I reply by asking a similar question, Mr. Latter? How do you?”

“I met him this afternoon on political business,” stammered the other, staring fascinated at the man opposite, from whose face all trace of buffoonery seemed to have vanished, to be replaced by a grim sternness the more terrifying
because it was so utterly unexpected. And he had thought Drummond a fool.

"Would it be indiscreet to inquire the nature of the business?"

"Yes," muttered Latter. "It was private."

"That I can quite imagine," returned Drummond grimly. "But since you’re so reticent I will tell you. This afternoon you made arrangements, perfect in every detail, to blow up the main power station of the Greystone works." The man in the bed started violently. "The result of that would have been to throw some three thousand men out of work for at least a couple of months."

"It’s a lie," said Latter thickly.

"Your object in so doing was obvious," continued Drummond. "Money. I don’t know how much, and I didn’t know who from — until last night." And now Latter was swallowing hard, and clutching the bed clothes with hands that shook like leaves.

"You saw me last night, Mr. Latter, didn’t you? And I found out your headquarters..."

"In God’s name—who are you?" His voice rose almost to a scream. "Aren’t you the police?"

"No—I am not." He was coming nearer, and Latter cowered back, mouthing. "I am not the police, you wretched thing: I am the leader of the Black Gang."

Latter felt the other’s huge hands on him, and struggled like a puny child, whimpering, half sobbing. He writhed and squirmed as a
gag was forced into his mouth: then he felt a rope cut his wrists as they were lashed behind his back. And all the while the other went on speaking in a calm, leisurely voice.

"The leader of the Black Gang, Mr. Latter: the gang that came into existence to exterminate things like you. Ever since the war you poisonous reptiles have been at work stirring up internal trouble in this country. Not one in ten of you believe what you preach: your driving force is money and your own advancement. And as for your miserable dupes—those priceless fellows who follow you blindly because—God help them, they're hungry and their wives are hungry—what do you care for them, Mr. Latter? You just laugh in your sleeve and pocket the cash."

With a heave he jerked the other on to the floor, and proceeded to lash him to the foot of the bed.

"I have had my eye on you, Mr. Latter, since the Manchester effort when ten men were killed, and you were the murderer. But other and more important matters have occupied my time. You see, my information is very good—better than Delmorlick's selection of friends. The new devoted adherent to your cause this afternoon happens to be an intimate personal friend of mine."

He was busying himself with something that he had taken from his pocket—a thick, square slab with a hole in the centre.

"I admit that your going to the police with my note surprised me. And it really was extraordinarily lucky that I happened to be
in the office at the time. But it necessitated
a slight change of plan on my part. If dear
old McIver and his minions are outside the
house, it’s much simpler for me to be in. And
now, Mr. Latter—to come to business.”

He stood in front of the bound man, whose
eyes were rolling horribly.

“We believe in making the punishment fit
the crime. This afternoon you planned to
destroy the livelihood of several thousand men
with explosive, simply that you might make
money. Here,” he held up the square slab,
“is a pound of the actual gun-cotton, which
was removed from Delmorlick himself before he
started on a journey to join my other speci-
mens. I propose to place this slab under you,
Mr. Latter, and to light this piece of fuse
which is attached to it. The fuse will take
about three minutes to burn. During that
three minutes if you can get free, so much the
better for you; if not—well, it would be a pity
not to have any explosion at all in Sheffield,
wouldn’t it?”

For a moment or two Drummond watched
the struggling, terrified man, and his eyes were
hard and merciless. Then he went to the
door, and Latter heard it opened and shut,
and moaned horribly. His impotent struggles
increased: out of the corner of his eye he
could see the fire burning nearer and nearer.
And then all of a sudden something seemed
to snap in his brain....

Four minutes later Drummond came out
from the screen behind which he had been
standing. He picked up the burnt-out fuse
and the block of wood to which it had been attached. Then he undid the ropes that bound the other man, removed the gag and put him back into bed. And after a while he nodded thoughtfully.

"Poetic justice," he murmured. "And it saves a lot of trouble."

Then, after one searching look round the room, he turned out the light and stepped quietly into the passage.

"An extraordinary thing, McIver," said Sir Bryan Johnstone, late on the afternoon of the following day. "You say that when you saw Mr. Latter this morning he was mad."

"Mad as a hatter, sir," answered McIver, turning for confirmation to Drummond, who was sprawling in a chair.

"Absolutely up the pole, Tum-tum," agreed Drummond.

"Gibbered like a fool," said McIver, "and struggled wildly whenever he got near the foot of the bed. Seemed terrified of it, somehow. Did you notice that, Mr. Drummond?"

"My dear old lad, it was only ten o'clock, and I was barely conscious," yawned that worthy, lighting a cigarette.

"Well, anyway, you had no trouble with the gang, McIver," said his chief.

"None, sir," agreed the Inspector. "I thought they wouldn’t try it on with me twice. I heard some fool story just before I caught the train, about one of the night watchmen at a big works who swears he saw a sort of court-
martial—he was an old soldier—being held on three men by a lot of black-masked figures. But a lot of these people have got this yarn on the brain, Sir Bryan. It’s spread a good deal farther than I thought."

Sir Bryan nodded thoughtfully.

"I must say I’d like to know what sent Charles Latter mad!"

Drummond sat up lazily.

"Good heavens! Tumkins, don’t you know? The house-party, old son—the house-party; they had to be seen to be believed."