CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH AN EFFUSION IS SENT TO THE NEWSPAPERS

Take a garrulous night-watchman and an enterprising journalist; mix them together over one, or even two glasses of beer, and a hard-worked editor feels safe for a column every time. And since the night-watchman at Greystone’s Steel Works was very garrulous, and the journalist was young and ambitious, the result produced several columns of the sort of stuff that everybody likes to read and pretends he doesn’t.

Mr. Day was the night-watchman’s name, and Mr. Day was prepared to tell his story at a pint a time to anyone who cared to listen. It differed in detail, the difference depending entirely on the number of payments received during the day, but the essential part remained the same. And it was that essential part that was first published in one of the local Sheffield papers, and from there found its way into the London Press.

Mr. Day, it appeared, had, according to his usual custom, been making his hourly tour of the works. It was about midnight, or perhaps a little after, that he thought he heard the
sound of voices coming from the central power station. As he approached it had seemed to him that it was more lit up than it had been on his previous round, when only one electric light had been burning. He was on the point of opening the door to go in and investigate, when he heard at least half a dozen voices speaking angrily, and one in particular had stood out above the others. It was loud and convulsed with passion, and on hearing it Mr. Day, remembering his wife and four children, had paused.

"You damned traitor, as sure as there's a God above, I'll kill you for this some day."

Such were the words which it appeared had given Mr. Day cause for reflection. At any time, and in any place, they would be apt to stand out from the ordinary level of bright chat; but as Mr. Day remarked succinctly, "they fair gave me the creeps, coming out o' that there place, which was hempty, mind you, not 'alf an hour before."

And there are few, I think, who can blame him for his decision not to open the door, but to substitute for such a course a strategic move to a flank. There was an outside flight of steps leading to a door which opened on to the upstairs platform where stood the indicator board. And half-way up that flight of stairs was a window—a window through which Mr. Day was peering a few seconds afterwards.

It was at this point in the narrative that Mr. Day was wont to pause, while his listeners drew closer. Standing between the four huge dynamos which supplied the whole of the power
necessary for the works were ten or a dozen men. Three of them had their hands lashed behind their backs, and these were the only three whose faces he could see. The others—and here came a still more impressive pause—were completely covered in black from head to foot. Black masks—black cloaks, the only difference between them being in height. He couldn’t hear what was being said: ever since the Boer War Mr. Day had been a little hard of hearing. But what it reminded him of was a drum-head court-martial. The three men whose hands were lashed behind them were the prisoners; the men in black, standing motionless round them, their judges. He heard vaguely the sound of a voice which went on speaking for some time. And since the three bound men seemed to be staring at one of the masked figures, he concluded that that must be the speaker. Then he saw the masked men surround the other three closely, and when they stood back again Mr. Day noticed that the prisoners had been gagged as well as bound. It was at this moment, apparently, that a hazy idea of going for the police penetrated his brain for the first time, but it was too late. Powerless in the hands of their captors, the three men were forced to the door, and shortly afterwards Mr. Day affirmed that he heard the sound of a car driving off. But he was unable to swear to it; he was still flattening a fascinated nose against the window; for two of the masked men had remained behind, and Mr. Day wasn’t going to miss anything.

These two gathered together into bundles a
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lot of things that looked like wooden slabs—also some stuff that looked like black cord. Then they walked carefully round the whole power station, as if to make sure that nothing had been left behind. Apparently satisfied with their inspection, they went to the door, carrying the bundles they had collected. They turned out all the lights except the one which had originally been burning, took one final look round to make certain that everything was as it should be, and then they, too, vanished into the night, leaving Mr. Day to scratch his head and wonder if he had been dreaming.

In fact, but for one indisputable certainty, it is very doubtful whether Mr. Day’s story would have been received with the respect which it undoubtedly deserved. When he first recounted it there were scoffers of the most incredulous type; scoffers who cast the most libellous reflections on the manner in which Mr. Day had spent the evening before going on duty, and it was not until the fact became established two or three days later that three men who should have come to work the next morning at their different jobs not only failed to appear, but had completely disappeared, leaving no trace behind them, that the scoffers became silent. Moreover, the enterprising journalist came on the scene, and Mr. Day became famous, and Mr. Day developed an infinite capacity for beer. Was not he, wildly improbable though his story might be, the only person who could throw any light at all on the mysterious disappearance of three workmen from Sheffield? Certainly the journalist
considered he was, and proceeded to write a column of the most convincing journalesese to proclaim his belief to the world at large, and Sheffield in particular.

Thus was the ball started. And no sooner had it commenced to move, than it received astonishing impetus from all sorts of unexpected directions. The journalist, in his search for copy to keep his infant alive, discovered to his astonishment that he had unearthed a full-grown child. The activities of the Black Gang were not such a profound mystery as he had at first thought. And though he failed to get the slightest clue as to the identity of the men composing it, he was soon absolutely convinced of the truth of Mr. Day’s story. But there he stuck; the whole matter became one of conjecture in his mind. That there was a Black Gang, he was certain; but why or wherefore was beyond him.

Men he encountered in odd places were non-committal. Some obviously knew nothing about it; others shrugged their shoulders and looked wise.

There was one group of youngish men he approached on the matter. They were standing at the corner of the long street which led from Greystone’s Works, muttering together, and their conversation ceased abruptly as he sauntered up.

“Journalist, are you?” said one. “Want to know about this ’ere Black Gang? Well, look ’ere, mister, I’ll tell you one thing. See them furnaces over there?”

He pointed to the ruddy, orange light of
Greystone’s huge furnaces, glowing fiercely against the evening sky.

“Well, if me and my mates ever catch the leader of that there gang, or anybody wot’s connected with it, they goes in them furnaces alive.”

“Shut up, yer blasted fool!” cried one of the others.

“Think I’m afraid of that bunch!” snarled the first speaker. “A bunch wot’s frightened to show their faces . . .”

But the journalist had passed on.

“Don’t you pay no attention to them young fools, mate,” said an elderly, quiet-looking man, who was standing smoking in a doorway a few yards on. “They talks too much and they does too little.”

“I was asking them about this so-called Black Gang,” said the searcher after news.

“Ah!” The elderly man spat thoughtfully. “Don’t profess to know nothing about them myself; but if wot I’ve ’eard is true, we could do with a few more like ’em.”

And once more the journalist passed on.

The police refused point-blank to make any communications on the matter at all. They had heard Mr. Day’s story, and while not disposed to dismiss it entirely, they would not say that they were prepared to accept it completely; and since it was a jolly day outside, and they were rather busy, the door was along the passage to the left.

Such were the ingredients, then, with which one, and sometimes two columns daily were made up for the edification of the inhabitants
of Sheffield. Brief notices appeared in one or two of the London dailies, coupled with the announcement that Mr. Charles Latter had suffered a nervous breakdown, and that this well-known M.P. had gone into a nursing-home for some weeks. But beyond that the matter was too local to be of importance, until a sudden dramatic development revived the flagging interest in Sheffield, and brought the matter into the national limelight.

It was nothing more nor less than an announcement purporting to come from the leader of the Black Gang himself, and sent to the editor of the Sheffield paper. It occupied a prominent position in the centre page, and was introduced to the public in the following words:

"The following communication has been received by the editor. The original, which he has handed over to the proper authorities, was typewritten; the postmark was a London one. The editor offers no comment on the genuineness of the document, beyond stating that it is printed exactly as it was received."

The document ran as follows:

"In view of the conflicting rumours started by the story of Mr. Day, the night-watchman at Greystone’s Works, it may be of interest to the public to know that his story is true in every detail. The three men whom he saw bound were engaged at the instigation of others in an attempt to wreck the main power station, thereby largely increasing unemployment in Sheffield, and fomenting more unrest. The driving force behind this, as behind other
similar activities, is international. The source of it all lies in other countries; the object is the complete ruin of the great sober majority of workers in England by a loud-voiced, money-seeking minority which is composed of unscrupulous scoundrels and fanatical madmen. For these apostles of anarchy a home has been prepared, where the doctrines of Communism are strictly enforced. The three men who have disappeared from Sheffield have gone to that home, but there is still plenty of room for others. Mr. Charles Latter has gone mad, otherwise he would have accompanied them. The more intelligent the man, the more vile the scoundrel. Charles Latter was intelligent. There are others more intelligent than he. It is expressly for their benefit that the Black Gang came into being. (Signed) THE LEADER OF THE GANG."

The reception of this remarkable document was mixed. On the strength of the first sentence Mr. Day's price rose to two pints; but it was the rest of the communication which aroused public interest. For the first time some tangible reason had been advanced to account for the presence of the three bound men and their masked captors in the power-station at Greystones. Inquiries revealed the fact that all three of them were men educated above the average, and of very advanced Socialistic views. And to that extent the document seemed credible. But it was the concluding sentences that baffled the public.

True, Mr. Charles Latter, M.P., had been staying on the night in question at Lady
Manton's house a few miles out of the town. Equally true he had had a nervous breakdown which necessitated his removal to a nursing-home in London. But what connection there could possibly be between him and the three men it was difficult to see. It was most positively asserted that the well-known Member of Parliament had not left Drayton House during the night on which the affair took place; and yet, if credence was to be attached to the document, there was an intimate connection between him and the affair at the steel works. Callers at the nursing-home came away none the wiser; his doctor had positively forbidden a soul to be admitted save his brother, who came away frowning after the first visit, and returned no more. For Charles Latter not only had not recognised him, but had shrunk away, babbling nonsense, while continually his eyes had sought the foot of the bed with a look of dreadful terror in them.

And so speculation continued. No further communication emanated from the mysterious Black Gang. Mr. Latter was insane; the three men had disappeared, and Mr. Day, even at two pints, could say no more than he had said already. There were people who dismissed the entire thing as an impudent and impertinent hoax, and stated that the editor of the Sheffield paper should be prosecuted for libel. It was obvious, they explained, what had occurred. Some irresponsible practical joker had, for reasons of his own, connected together the two acts, whose only real connection was that they had occurred about the same time,
and had maliciously sent the letter to the paper.

But there were others who were not so sure—people who nodded wisely at one another from the corners of trains, and claimed inside knowledge of strange happenings unknown to the mere public. They affirmed darkly that there was more in it than met the eye, and relapsed into confidential mutterings.

And then, when nothing further happened, the matter died out of the papers, and speculation ceased amongst the public. The general impression left behind favoured a hoax; and at that it was allowed to remain until the events occurred which were to prove that it was a very grim reality.

But whatever the general public may have thought about the matter, there were two people in London who viewed the sudden newspaper notoriety with rage and anger. And it is, perhaps, needless to say that neither of them concurred in the impression that it was a hoax; only too well did they know that it was nothing of the kind.

The first of these was Count Zadowa, alias Mr. William Atkinson. He had duly received from Latter a telegram in code stating that everything was well—a telegram dispatched from Sheffield after the meeting with Delmorlick in the afternoon. And from that moment he had heard nothing. The early editions of the evening papers on the following day had contained no reference to any explosion at
Sheffield; the later ones had announced Mr. Latter’s nervous breakdown. And the Count, reading between the lines, had wondered, though at that time he was far from guessing the real truth. Then had come strange rumours—rumours which resulted in the summoning post-haste from Sheffield of a man who was alluded to in the archives at 5, Green Street, as John Smith, commission agent. And, though he may have fully deserved the description of commission agent, a glance at his face gave one to wonder at his right to the name of John Smith.

"Tell me exactly what has happened," said the Count quietly, pointing to a chair in his inner office. "Up to date I have only heard rumours."

And John Smith, with the accent of a Polish Jew, told. Mr. Latter had called on him, early in the afternoon, and, in accordance with his instructions, he had arranged a meeting between Mr. Latter and Delmorlick at an hotel. Delmorlick had taken three other men with him, and he presumed everything had been arranged at that meeting. No; he had not been present himself. For two of Delmorlick’s companions he could vouch; in fact—and then, for the first time, Count Zadora heard the story so ably spread abroad by Mr. Day. For it was those two men and Delmorlick who had disappeared.

"Then it was the fourth man who gave it away," snapped the Count. "Who was he?"

"He called himself Jackson," faltered the other. "But I haven’t seen him since."
Thoughtfully the Count beat a tattoo with his fingers on the desk in front of him; no one looking at him would have guessed for an instant the rage that was seething in his brain. For the first time he realised fully that, perfect though his own organisation might be, he had come up against one that was still better.

"And what about this nervous breakdown of Mr. Latter's?" he demanded at length.

But on that subject John Smith knew nothing. He had no ideas on the subject, and, after a few searching questions, he found himself curtly dismissed, leaving the Count to ponder over the knotty point as to the connection between Latter's breakdown and the affair at the power station. And he was still pondering over it three days later when the bombshell exploded in the form of the document to the Press. That the concluding sentences were evidently directed against him did not worry him nearly as much as the publicity afforded to activities in which secrecy was essential. And what worried him even more was the fact that others on the Continent—men whose names were never mentioned, but who regarded him almost as he regarded Latter—would see the English papers, and would form their own conclusions. Already some peremptory letters had reached him, stating that the activities of the Black Gang must cease—how, it was immaterial. And he had replied stating that he had the thing well in hand. On top of which had come this damnable document, which was published in
practically every paper in the country, and had produced a sort of silly-season discussion from "Retired Colonel" and "Maiden Lady." Of no importance to him that "Common Sense" decreed that it was a stupid hoax: he knew it was not. And so did those others, as he very soon found out. Two days after the appearance of the document, he received a letter which bore the postmark of Amsterdam. It stated merely: "I am coming," and was signed X. And had anyone been present when Count Zadowa opened that letter in his private office, he would have seen an unexpected sight. He would have seen him tear the letter into a thousand pieces, and then wipe his forehead with a hand that trembled a little. For Count Zadowa, who terrified most men, was frightened himself.

The second person who viewed this sudden notoriety with dislike was Inspector McIver. And in his case, too, the reason was largely personal. He was caught on the horns of a dilemma, as Sir Bryan Johnstone, who was not too pleased with the turn of events, pointed out to him a little caustically. Either the entire thing was a hoax, in which case, why had McIver himself taken such elaborate precautions to prevent anything happening? or it was not a hoax, in which case McIver had been made a complete fool of.

"I'll stake my reputation on the fact that no one got into or left the house that night, Sir Bryan," he reiterated again and again. "That the Black Gang was at work in the town, I admit; but I do not believe that Mr.
Latter’s condition is anything more than a strange coincidence."

It was an interview that he had with Mr. Latter’s brother, that caused him to go round to Drummond’s house in Brook Street. Much as he disliked having to do so he felt he must leave no stone unturned if he was to get to the bottom of the affair, and Mr. Latter’s brother had said one or two things which he thought might be worth following up. If only Hugh Drummond wasn’t such a confounded fool, he reflected savagely, as he turned into Bond Street, it would have been possible to get some sane information. But that was his chief’s fault; he entirely washed his hands of the responsibility of roping in such a vast idiot. And it was at that stage in his meditations that a Rolls-Royce drew silently up beside him, and the cheerful voice of the subject of his thoughts hailed him delightedly.

"The very man, and the very spot!"

McIver turned round and nodded briefly.

"Morning, Captain Drummond! I was just going round to your house to see you."

"But, my, dear old top," cried Hugh, "don’t you see where you are? The portals of the Regency positively beckon us. Behind those portals a cocktail apiece, and you shall tell me all your troubles."

He gently propelled the inspector through the doors of the celebrated club, still babbling cheerfully.

"After profound experience, old lad," he remarked, coming to anchor by the bar, "I have come to the conclusion that there is only
one thing in this world better than having a cocktail at twelve o’clock.”

“What’s that?” said McIver perfunctorily.

“Having two,” answered Drummond triumphantly.

The inspector smiled wanly. After his profound experience he had come to the conclusion that there could exist no bigger ass in the world than Drummond, but he followed a trade where at times it is necessary to suffer fools gladly. And this was one of them.

“Is there any place where we could have a little private talk, Captain Drummond?” he asked, as the other pushed a Martini towards him.

“What about that corner over there?” said Drummond, after glancing round the room.

“Excellent!” agreed the inspector, and, picking up his cocktail, he crossed over to it and sat down. It took his host nearly five minutes to do the same short journey, and McIver chafed irritably at the delay. He was a busy man, and it seemed to him that Drummond knew everyone in the room. Moreover, he insisted on talking to them at length. And once again a feeling of anger against his chief filled his mind. What had Drummond except his great strength to distinguish him from this futile crowd of cocktail-drinking men? All of them built on the same pattern; all of them fashioned along the same lines. Talking a strange jargon of their own—idle, perfectly groomed, bored. As far as they were concerned, he was non-existent save as the man who was with Drummond. He smiled a little
grimly; he, who did more man's work in a week than the whole lot of them put together got through in a year. A strange caste, he reflected, as he sipped his drink; a caste which does not aim at, because it essentially is, good form; a caste which knows only one fetish—the absolute repression of all visible emotion, a caste which incidentally pulled considerably more than its own weight in the war. McIver gave them credit for that.

"Sorry to be so long." Drummond lowered himself into a chair. "The place is always crowded at this hour. Now, what's the little worry?"

"It's about the affair up at Sheffield," said the inspector. "I suppose you've seen this communication in the papers, purporting to come from the leader of the Black Gang."

"Rather, old lad," answered Drummond. "Waded through it over the eggs the other morning. Pretty useful effort, I thought."

"The public at large regard it as a hoax," continued McIver. "Now, I know it isn't! The typewriter used in the original document is the same as was used in their previous communications."

"By Jove, that's quick!" said Drummond admiringly. "Deuced quick."

McIver frowned.

"Now please concentrate, Captain Drummond. The concluding sentence of the letter would lead one to suppose that there was some connection between the activities of this gang and Mr. Charles Latter's present condition. I, personally, don't believe it. I think it was
mere coincidence. But whichever way it is, I would give a great deal to know what sent him mad.”

“Is he absolutely up the pole?” demanded Drummond.

“Absolutely! His brother has seen him, and after he had seen him he came to me. He tells me that the one marked symptom is an overmastering terror of something which he seems to see at the foot of the bed. He follows this thing round with his eyes—I suppose he thinks it’s coming towards him—and then he screams. His brother believes that someone or something must have been in his room that night—a something so terrifying that it sent him mad. To my mind, of course, the idea is wildly improbable, but strange things do occur.”

“Undoubtedly!” agreed Drummond.

“Now you were in the house,” went on the inspector; “you even examined his room, as you told Sir Bryan. Now, did you examine it closely?”

“Even to looking under the bed,” answered Drummond brightly.

“And there was nothing there? No place where anybody or anything could hide?”

“Not a vestige of a spot. In fact, my dear old police hound,” continued Drummond, draining his glass, “if the genial brother is correct in his supposition, the only conclusion we can come to is that I sent him mad myself.”

McIver frowned again.

“I wish you’d be serious, Captain Drummond. There are other things in life beside
cocktails and—this.” He waved an expressive hand round the room. “The matter is an important one. You can give me no further information? You heard no sounds during the night?”

“Only the sheep-faced man snoring,” answered Drummond, with a grin. And then, of a sudden, he became serious, and leaning across the table, he stared fixedly at the inspector.

“I think we must conclude, McIver, that the madness of Mr. Latter is due to the ghosts of the past, and perhaps the spectres of the present. A punishment, McIver, for things done which it is not good to do—a punishment which came to him in the night. That’s when the ghosts are abroad.” He noted McIver’s astonished face and gradually his own relaxed into a smile. “Pretty good, that—wasn’t it, after only one cocktail. You ought to hear me after my third.”

“Thanks very much, Captain Drummond,” laughed the inspector, “but that was quite good enough for me. We don’t deal in ghosts in my service.”

“Well, I’ve done my best,” sighed Drummond, waving languidly at a waiter to repeat the dose. “It’s either that or me. I know my face is pretty bad, but—”

“I don’t think we need worry about either alternative,” said McIver, rising.

“Right oh, old lad,” answered Drummond. “You know best. You’ll have another?”

“No more, thanks. I have to work sometimes.”
The inspector picked up his hat and stick, and Drummond strolled across the room with him.

"Give my love to Tum-tum."

"Sir Bryan is not at the office to-day, Captain Drummond," answered McIver coldly. "Good-morning."

With a faint smile Drummond watched the square, sturdy figure swing through the doors into Bond Street, then he turned and thoughtfully made his way back to the table.

"Make it seven, instead of two," he told the waiter, who was hovering round.

And had McIver returned at that moment he would have seen six of these imperturbable, bored men rise unobtrusively from different parts of the room, and saunter idly across to the corner where he had recently been sitting. It would probably not have struck him as an unusual sight—Drummond and six of his pals having a second drink; in fact, it would have struck him as being very usual. He was an unimaginative man was the inspector.

"Well," said Peter Darrell, lighting a cigarette. "And what had he got to say?"

"Nothing of interest," answered Drummond. "I told him the truth, and he wouldn't believe me. Algy back yet?"

"This morning," said Ted Jerningham. "He's coming round here. Had a bit of trouble, I gather. And, talk of the devil—here he is."

Algy Longworth, his right arm in a sling, was threading his way towards them.
“What’s happened, Algy?” said Hugh as he came up.

“That firebrand Delmorlick stuck a knife into me,” grinned Algy. “We put him on a rope and dropped him overboard, and towed him for three hundred yards. Cooled his ardour. I think he’ll live all right.”

“And how are all the specimens?”

“Prime, old son—prime! If we leave ’em long enough, they’ll all have murdered one another.”

Drummond put down his empty glass with a laugh.

“The first British Soviet. Long life to ’em! Incidentally, ten o’clock to-night. Usual rendezvous. In view of your arm, Algy—transfer your instructions to Ted. You’ve got ’em?”

“In my pocket here. But, Hugh, I can easily——”

“Transfer to Ted, please. No argument! We’ve got a nice little job—possibly some sport. Read ’em, Ted—and business as usual. So long, boys! Phyllis and I are lunching with some awe-inspiring relatives.”

The group broke up as casually as it had formed, only Ted Jerningham remaining behind. And he was reading what looked like an ordinary letter. He read it through carefully six or seven times; then he placed it in the fire, watching it until it was reduced to ashes. A few minutes later he was sitting down to lunch with his father, Sir Patrick Jerningham, Bart., at the latter’s club in Pall Mall. And it is possible that that worthy and
conscientious gentleman would not have eaten such a hearty meal had he known that his only son was detailed for a job that very night which, in the event of failure, would mean either prison or a knife in the back—probably the latter.