CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH A BOMB BURSTS AT UNPLEASANTLY CLOSE QUARTERS

It was perhaps because the thought of failure never entered Hugh Drummond’s head that such a considerable measure of success had been possible up to date—that, and the absolute, unquestioning obedience which he demanded of his pals, and which they accorded him willingly. As they knew, he laid no claims to brilliance; but as they also knew, he hid a very shrewd common sense beneath his frivolous manner. And having once accepted the sound military truism that one indifferent general is better than two good ones, they accepted his leadership with unswerving loyalty. What was going to be the end of their self-imposed fight against the pests of society did not worry them greatly; all that mattered was that there should be a certain amount of sport in the collection of the specimens. Granted the promise of that, they willingly sacrificed any engagements and carried out Hugh’s orders to the letter. Up to date, however, the campaign, though far from being dull, had not produced any really big results. A number of sprats and a few moderate-sized fish had duly been caught in
the landing-net, and been sent to the private pool to meditate at leisure. But nothing really large had come their way. Zaboleff was a good haul, and the madness of Mr. Latter was all for the national welfare. But the Black Gang, which aimed merely at the repression of terrorism by terrorism, had found it too easy. The nauseating cowardice of the majority of their opponents was becoming monotonous, their strong aversion to soap and water, insanitary. They wanted big game—not the rats that emerged from the sewers.

Even Drummond had begun to feel that patriotism might be carried too far, until the moment when the address in Hoxton had fallen into his hands. Then, with the optimism that lives eternal in the hunter’s breast, fresh hope had arisen in his mind. It had been held in abeyance temporarily owing to the little affair at Sheffield. Yet now that that was over he had determined on a bigger game. If it failed—if they drew blank—he had almost decided to chuck the thing up altogether. Phyllis, he knew, would be overjoyed if he did.

“Just this one final coup, old girl,” he said, as they sat waiting in the Carlton for the awe-inspiring relatives. “I’ve got it cut and dried, and it comes off to-night. If it’s a dud, we’ll dissolve ourselves—at any rate, for the present. If only——”

He sighed, and his wife looked at him reproachfully.

“I know you want another fight with Petersen, you old goat,” she remarked. “But
you'll never see him again, or that horrible girl."

"Don't you think I shall, Phyl?" He stared despondently at his shoes. "I can't help feeling myself that somewhere or other behind all this that cheery bird is lurking. My dear, it would be too ghastly if I never saw him again."

"The next time you see him, Hugh," she answered quietly, "he won't take any chances with you."

"But, my angel child," he boomed cheerfully. "I don't want him to. Not on your life! Nor shall I. Good Lord! Here they are. Uncle Timothy looks more like a mangel-wurzel than ever."

And so at nine-thirty that evening, a party of five men sat waiting in a small sitting-room of a house situated in a remote corner of South Kensington. Some easels stood round the walls covered with half-finished sketches, as beffited a room belonging to a budding artist such as Toby Sinclair. Not that he was an artist or even a budding one, but he felt that a man must have some excuse for living in South Kensington. And so he had bought the sketches and put them round the room, principally to deceive the landlady. The fact that he was never there except at strange hours merely confirmed that excellent woman's opinion that all artists were dissolute rascals. But he paid his rent regularly, and times were hard, especially in South Kensington. Had the worthy soul known that her second best sitting-room was the rendezvous of this Black
Gang whose letter to the paper she and her husband had discussed over the matutinal kipper, it is doubtful if she would have been so complacent. But she didn’t know, and continued her weekly dusting of the sketches with characteristic zeal.

“Ted should be here soon,” said Drummond, glancing at his watch. “I hope he’s got the bird all right.”

“You didn’t get into the inner room, did you, Hugh?” said Peter Darrell.

“No. But I saw enough to know that it’s beyond our form, old lad. We’ve got to have a skilled cracksman to deal with one of the doors—and almost certainly anything important will be in a safe inside.”

“Just run over the orders again.” Toby Sinclair came back from drawing the blinds even more closely together.

“Perfectly simple,” said Hugh. “Ted and I and Ginger Martin—if he’s got him—will go straight into the house through the front door. I know the geography of the place all right, and I’ve already laid out the caretaker clerk fellow once. Then we must trust to luck. There shouldn’t be anybody there except the little blighter of a clerk. The rest of you will hang about outside in case of any trouble. Don’t bunch together, keep on the move; but keep the doors in sight. When you see us come out again, make your own way home. Can’t give you any more detailed instructions because I don’t know what may turn up. I shall rig myself out here, after Ted arrives. You had better go to your own rooms and do
it, but wait first to make sure that he's roped in Ginger Martin."

He glanced up as the door opened and Jerry Seymour—sometime of the R.F.C.—put his head into the room.

"Ted’s here, and he’s got the bird all right. Unpleasant-looking bloke with a flattened face."

"Right." Drummond rose, and crossed to a cupboard. "Clear off, you fellows. Zero—twelve midnight."

From the cupboard he pulled a long black cloak and mask, which he proceeded to put on, while the others disappeared with the exception of Jerry Seymour, who came into the room. He was dressed in livery like a chauffeur, and he had, in fact, been driving the car in which Ted had brought Ginger Martin.

"Any trouble?" asked Drummond.

"No. Once he was certain Ted was nothing to do with the police he came like a bird," said Jerry. "The fifty quid did it." Then he grinned. "You know Ted’s a marvel. I’ll defy anybody to recognise him."

Drummond nodded, and sat down at the table facing the door.

"Tell Ted to bring him up. And I don’t want him to see you, Jerry, so keep out of the light."

Undoubtedly Jerry Seymour was right with regard to Jerningham’s make-up. As he and Martin came into the room, it was only the sudden start and cry on the part of the crook that made Drummond certain as to which was which.
“Blimey!” muttered the man, shrinking back as he saw the huge figure in black confronting him. “Wot’s the game, guv’nor?”

“There’s no game, Martin,” said Drummond reassuringly. “You’ve been told what you’re wanted for, haven’t you? A little professional assistance to-night, for which you will be paid fifty pounds, is all we ask of you.”

But Ginger Martin still seemed far from easy in his mind. Like most of the underworld he had heard strange stories of the Black Gang long before they had attained the notoriety of print. Many of them were exaggerated, doubtless, but the general impression left in his mind was one of fear. The police were always with him: the police he understood. But this strange gang was beyond his comprehension, and that in itself was sufficient to frighten him.

“You’re one of this ’ere Black Gang,” he said sullenly, glancing at the door in front of which Jerningham was standing. Should he chance it and make a dash to get away? Fifty pounds are fifty pounds, but—— He gave a little shiver as his eyes came round again to the motionless figure on the other side of the table.

“Quite correct, Martin,” said the same reassuring voice. “And it’s only because I don’t want you to recognise me that I’m dressed up like this. We don’t mean you any harm.” The voice paused for a moment, and then went on again. “You understand that, Martin. We don’t mean you any harm, unless——and once again there came a pause——unless you try any monkey tricks. You are to do
exactly as I tell you, without question and at once. If you do you will receive fifty pounds. If you don’t—well, Martin, I have ways of dealing with people who don’t do what I tell them.”

There was silence while Ginger Martin fidgeted about, looking like a trapped animal. How he wished now that he’d had nothing to do with the thing at all. But it was too late to bother about that; here he was, utterly ignorant of his whereabouts—trapped.

“What do yer want me to do, guv’nor?” he said at last.

“Open a safe amongst other things,” answered Drummond. “Have you brought your tools and things?”

“Yus—I’ve brought the outfit,” muttered the other. “Where is the safe? ’Ere?”

“No, Martin, not here. Some distance away in fact. We shall start in about an hour. Until then you will stop in this room. You can have a whisky-and-soda, and my friend here will stay with you. He has a gun, Martin, so remember what I said. No monkey tricks.”

With fascinated eyes the crook watched the speaker rise and cross to an inner door. Standing he seemed more huge than ever, and Martin gave a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him.

“I reckon ’e wouldn’t win a prize as a blinking dwarf,” he remarked hoarsely to Jerningham. “I say, mister, wot abaht that there whisky-and-soda?”
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The entrance to Number 5, Green Street, proved easier than Drummond had expected—so easy as to be almost suspicious. No lights shone in the windows above: the house seemed completely deserted. Moreover, the door into the street was unbolted, and without a moment’s hesitation Drummond opened it and stepped inside, followed by Martin and Ted Jerningham. The long black cloak had been discarded; only the black mask concealed his face, as the three men stood inside the door, listening intently. Not a sound was audible, and after a moment or two Drummond felt his way cautiously through the downstairs office towards the flight of stairs that led to the rooms above. And it was just as his foot was on the first stair that a sudden noise behind made him draw back sharply into the darkness behind the counter, with a warning whisper to the other two to follow his example.

The front door had opened again; someone else had come in. They could see nothing, and the only sound seemed to be the slightly quickened breathing of Ted Jerningham, whose nerve was not quite as good as the others at affairs of this sort. Then came the sound of bolts being shot home, and footsteps coming into the office.

With a whispered “Stay there,” Drummond glided across towards the door like a shadow, moving with uncanny silence for such a big man. And a moment or two afterwards someone came into the office. Jerningham, crouching against the crook behind the counter, could see the outline of a figure framed in the faint
light that filtered in from a street lamp through the fanlight over the door. Then there was a click, and the electric light was switched on.

For a second the new-comer failed to see them; then, with a sudden gasp he stiffened, and stood staring at them rigidly. It was Cohen, the unpleasant little clerk, returning from an evening out, which accounted for the front door having been unbolted. And undoubtedly his luck was out. Because, having seen the two of them there behind the counter, he somewhat naturally failed to look for anybody else. It would not have made any great difference if he had, but the expression on his face as he felt two enormous hands close gently but firmly round his throat from behind caused even the phlegmatic Ginger to chuckle grimly.

"Out with the light," snapped Drummond, "then help me lash him up and gag him."

It was done quickly and deftly, and for the second time in a week the wretched Cohen was laid under his own counter to cool. It had been carried out as noiselessly as possible, but it was five minutes before Drummond again led the way cautiously up the stairs. And during that five minutes the three men listened with every sense alert, striving to differentiate between the ordinary street noises and anything unusual in the house above them. But not even Drummond’s ears, trained as they had been for many nights in No Man’s Land, could detect anything. All seemed as quiet as the grave.

"It probably is empty except for that little
rat,” he whispered to Jerningham. “But we’ll take no chances.”

In single file they crept up the stairs, Drummond leading. The door at the top was ajar, and for a while they stood in the carpeted passage above listening again.

“Along this passage are the clerks’ offices,” he explained in a low voice to the other two. “At the far end is another door which we shall probably find locked. Beyond that is the inner office, which we want.”

“Well, let’s get on wiv it, guv’nor,” muttered Ginger Martin hoarsely. “There’s no good in ‘anging abaht.”

Drummond switched on his electric torch, and flashed it cautiously round. Doors leading off the passage were open in most cases, and all the rooms were empty; it was obvious that none of the staff were about. And yet he felt an indefinable sense of danger, which he tried in vain to shake off. Somehow or other, he felt certain that they were not alone—that there were other people in the house, besides the trussed up clerk below. But Ginger Martin had no such presentiments, and was rapidly becoming impatient. To open the door at the end of the passage, if it should prove to be locked, was such child’s play as to be absolutely contemptible. He wanted to get on with the safe, which might take time, instead of fooling round in a passage listening for mice.

At last Drummond moved slowly forward with the other two just behind him. Whatever he may have thought he had every intention
of going through with the job, and delay in such cases only tends to turn vague fears into certain realities. Gently he tried the door at the end of the passage; as he had anticipated it was locked.

"'Old the light, guv'nor, so that it shines on the blinkin' key'-ole!" said Ginger Martin impatiently. "I'll get this open as easy as kiss yer 'and."

Without a sound, the cracksman set to work; his coarse features outlined in the circle of the torch, his ill-kept fingers handling his instruments as deftly as any surgeon. A little oil here and there; a steady pressure with a short pointed steel tool; a faint click.

"There you are, guv'nor," he muttered, straightening up. "Easy as kiss yer 'and. And if yer waits till I find me glove I'll open it for yer; but Ginger Martin's finger-prints are too well known to run any risks."

Still no sound came from anywhere, though the click as the lock shot back had seemed horribly loud in the silence. And then, just as Martin cautiously turned the handle and pushed open the door, Drummond stiffened suddenly and switched off his torch. He could have sworn that he heard the sound of voices close by.

Only for a second—they were instantly silenced; but just for that fraction of time as the door opened he felt certain he had heard men speaking.

"Wot's the matter?" he heard Martin's hoarse whisper come out of the darkness.

"Did you hear voices?" he breathed in
reply. "I thought I did as you opened the door."

Once again the three men stood motionless, listening intently, but the sound was not repeated. Absolute silence reigned, broken only by the noise of their own breathing. And at last, after what seemed an interminable pause, Drummond switched on his torch again. The passage was empty; the door of the inner office was just in front of them. Almost he was persuaded that he must have made a mistake—that it had been his imagination. He peered through the keyhole: the room was in darkness. He turned the handle cautiously; the door gave to him; and still with his torch held well in front of him, he stepped into the room, turning the light into every corner. Not a trace of anyone; the inner office was absolutely empty. He flashed the light all round the walls, as far as he could see there was no other door—not even a window. Consequently the only way out was by the door through which they had just entered, which was obviously impossible for anyone to have done without his knowledge.

"It is all right!" he muttered, turning round to the other two. "Must have been my mistake. Let's get on with it."

"There's a mighty strong smell of cigar smoke," said Jerningham dubiously.

"No ventilation, old man," returned Drummond. "Hangs about for hours. No other door, no window. Now then, Ginger, let's tackle the big desk first. It looks pretty easy, even to me."
As he spoke he moved into the centre of the room, his torch lighting up the big roll-top desk.

"Right-ho, guv'nor. Keep the beam on the key-hole——"

The crook bent over his task, only to straighten up suddenly as all the lights went on.

"Yer damned fool!" he snarled. "Switch 'em off! It ain't safe."

"I didn't put 'em on!" snapped Drummond.

"Nor I," said Jerningham.

For a moment or two no one spoke; then Ginger Martin made a wild dive for the door. But the door which had opened so easily a few moments before now refused to budge, though he tugged at it, cursing horribly. And after a while he gave it up, and turned on Drummond like a wild beast.

"You've trapped me, yer —— swine. I'll get even with you over this if I swing for it!"

But Drummond, to whom the presence of actual danger was as meat and drink, took not the slightest notice. His brain, ice-cold and clear, was moving rapidly. It had not been a mistake, he had heard voices—voices which came from that very room in which they now were. Men had been there—men who had got out by some other way. And Ginger Martin was trapped—all of them. More out of thoughtlessness than anything else, he brushed the swearing crook aside with the back of his hand—much as one brushes away a troublesome fly. And Martin, feeling as if he'd been
kicked in the mouth by a horse, ceased to swear.

It was uncanny—devilish. The room empty, save for them, suddenly flooded with light. But by whom? Drummond felt they were being watched. But by whom? And then suddenly he heard Ted Jerningham’s voice, low and tense.

"There’s a man watching us, Hugh. I can see his eyes. In that big safe door."

Like a flash, Drummond swung round, and looked at the safe. Ted was right; he could see the eyes himself, and they were fixed on him with an expression of malignant fury through a kind of opening that looked like the slit in a letter box. For a moment or two they remained there, staring at him, then they disappeared, and the opening through which he had seen them disappeared also, and seemed to become part of the door. And it was just as he was moving towards this mysterious safe to examine it closer that with a sudden clang, another opening appeared—one much larger than the first. He stopped involuntarily as something was thrown through into the room—something which hissed and spluttered.

For a moment he gazed at it uncomprehendingly as it lay on the floor; then he gave a sudden, tense order.

"On your faces—for your lives?" His voice cut through the room like a knife. "Behind the desk, you fools! It’s a bomb!"