CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH THERE IS A STORMY SUPPER PARTY
AT THE RITZ

It was just about the time that Ginger Martin’s wife became, all unconsciously, a widow that the sitting-room bell of a certain private suite in the Ritz was rung. The occupants of the room were two in number—a man and a woman—and they had arrived only that morning from the Continent. The man, whose signature in the register announced him to be the Reverend Theodosius Longmoor—looked a splendid specimen of the right sort of clergyman. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a pair of shrewd, kindly eyes and a great mass of snow-white hair, he was the type of man who attracted attention wherever he went, and in whatever society he found himself. A faint twang in his speech betrayed his nationality, and, indeed, he made no secret of it. He was an American born and bred, who had been seeing first hand for himself some of the dreadful horrors of the famine which was ravaging Central Europe.

And with him had gone his daughter Janet—that faithful, constant companion of his, who since her mother’s death had never left
him. She was a good-looking girl, too—though perhaps unkind people might have said girlhood's happy days had receded somewhat into the past. Thirty, perhaps—even thirty-five—though her father always alluded to her as "My little girl."

There was something very sweet and touching about their relationship; his pride in her and her simple, loving adoration for Dad. Only that evening before dinner they had got into conversation in the lounge with a party of American globe-trotters, who had unanimously voted them quite charming.

"I feel," had said the Reverend Theodosius, "that it is almost wicked our staying in such an hotel as this, after the dreadful things we've seen. How my little girl stood it at all I don't know." He took his daughter's hand and patted it lovingly.

"I guess," said Janet with her faint, sweet smile, "I guess the Dad deserves it. Why he nearly worked himself ill doing relief work and things out there in Vienna and places."

"Is there any lack of funds, Mr. Longmoor?" asked one lady. "One feels one ought to do something to help."

The Reverend Theodosius gave her one of his rare sweet smiles.

"There was when I left," he murmured. "You'd never believe how money goes out there, and really the poor children have very little to show for it."

"Too bad—too bad." A square-jawed man who was a member of the party beckoned to a passing waiter. "Say, Mr. Longmoor, will
you drink a cocktail with me? And your daughter, too?

"It is very good of you, sir," answered the clergyman, with a courteous bow. "My little girl has never even tasted one and I think perhaps she had better not. What do you think, my child?"

"I'd love to try, Daddy, dear," she said coaxingly. "Do you think I might? Or would it make my head go funny?"

They all laughed.

"That settles it, Miss Longmoor," cried the man. "I've ordered one for you, and if you don't drink it your father will have to drink two."

Undoubtedly a charming couple had been the verdict of these chance acquaintances—so simple, so fresh, so unassuming in these days of complexity and double-dealing. The only pity of it was, as the square-jawed man remarked to his wife at dinner, that the very quality of child-like simplicity which made them so charming was the one which laid them open to the most bare-faced swindling if they ever came up against blackguards.

After dinner they had all drunk coffee together, and then, because his little Janet was tired, the Reverend Theodosius and his daughter had retired after accepting an invitation to dinner the next day.

"Who are they?" asked Janet, as they entered their sitting room.

"That square-jawed man is John Pendel," answered her father, thoughtfully lighting a cigar. "Worth about three million. He's
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good for dining with, though I’m not over here on any side-shows.”

And then for two hours until he got up and rang the bell, the Reverend Theodosius re-
mained engrossed in work; while his little Janet, lying on the sofa, displayed considerably
more leg than one would have expected a vicar’s daughter even to possess. And occa-
sional gurgles of laughter seemed to prove that Guy de Maupassant appeals to a more Catholic
audience than he would have suspected.

She was knitting decorously when the waiter came in, and her father ordered a little supper
to be sent up.

“Some chicken, please, and a little foie gras. I am expecting a friend very soon—so lay for
three. Some champagne—yes. Perrier Jouet ’04 will do. I’m afraid I don’t know much
about wine. And a little Vichy water for my daughter.”

The waiter withdrew, and the Reverend Theodosius chuckled.

“There’s a very good bath you can empty it down, my dear,” he said. “But I don’t think my little Janet should drink champagne so late. It might make her head go funny.”

She smiled and then grew serious.

“What time do you expect Zadowa?”

“He should have been here by now. I don’t know why he’s late.”

“Did you see him this afternoon?”

“No. I was down at the office, but only for a short while.”

The sound of voices outside the door caused Janet to resume her knitting, and the next
moment Count Zadowa was announced. For an appreciable time after the waiter had withdrawn he stood staring at them: then a smile crossed his face.

"Magnificent," he murmured. "Superb. Madame, I felicitate you. Well though I know your powers, this time you have excelled yourself."

"Cut that out, and get to business," returned little Janet shortly, "I'm tired."

"But should we be interrupted," remarked the Reverend Theodosius, "we have just returned from an extensive tour in the famine-stricken area round Vienna."

The Count bowed and smiled again.

"C'est entendu," he said quietly. "And now we will certainly get to business. For I have the most wonderful news for you, mes amis."

A warning gesture from the girl announced the arrival of supper, and for a while the conversation turned on the rival merits of different types of soup kitchen. And it was not until the outer door finally closed behind the waiter, that the Reverend Theodosius bit the end off another cigar and stared at his visitor with eyes from which every trace of kindliness had vanished.

"It's about time you did have some good news, Zadowa," he snapped. "Anything more damned disgraceful than the way you've let this so-called Black Gang do you in, I've never heard of."

But the other merely smiled quietly.

"I admit it," he murmured. "Up to date
they have scored a faint measure of success—
exaggerated, my friends, greatly exaggerated
by the papers. To-night came the reckoning,
which incidentally is the reason why I am a
little late. To-night”—he leaned forward im-
pressively—“the leader of the gang himself
honoured me with a visit. And the leader will
lead no more.”

“You killed him,” said the girl, helping
herself to champagne.

“I did,” answered the Count. “And with-
out the leader I think we can ignore, the
gang.”

“That’s all right as far as it goes,” said the
Reverend Theodosius in a slightly mollified
tone. “But have you covered all your traces?
In this country the police get peevish over
murder.”

The Count gave a self-satisfied smile.

“Not only that,” he remarked, “but I have
made it appear as if he had killed himself.
Listen, my friends, and I will give you a brief
statement of the events of the past few days.
It was the day before the affair at Sheffield
which caused such a commotion in the papers
that I suddenly found out that the leader of
this gang had discovered my headquarters in
Hoxton. I was actually talking to that
wretched man Latter in my office at the time,
when I heard outside the call of an owl. Now
from information I had received, that was the
rallying call of their gang, and I dashed into
the passage. Sure enough, standing by the
door at the end was a huge man covered from
head to foot in black. Whether it was bravado
that made him give the cry, or whether it was a ruse to enable him to see me, is immaterial now. As I say—he is dead. But—and this is the point—it made me decide that the office there, convenient though it was, would have to be given up. There were far too many incriminating documents to allow me to run the risk of a police raid; and since I frankly admit now that I was not at all sure what were the relations between this gang and the police, I decided to move my headquarters."

Count Zadowa helped himself to a sandwich before continuing, with a pleasant feeling that the motionless attention of the Reverend Theodosius was a compliment to his powers as a raconteur. And as the hunchback reflected complacently, there was no falling off in this story—no anticlimax.

"To-night," he continued, sipping his glass, "I was completing the final sorting out of my papers with my secretary, when the electric warning disc on my desk glowed red. Now the office was empty, and the red light meant that someone had opened the door outside. I heard nothing, which only made it all the more suspicious. So between us we gathered up every important paper, switched off all lights, and went out through the secret door. Then we waited."

He turned to the clergyman, still motionless save for a ceaseless tapping of his left knee with his hand.

"As you know, monsieur," he proceeded, "there is an opening in that door through which one can see into the room. And through
that opening I watched developments. After a while a torch was switched on at the further door, and I heard voices. And then the man holding the torch came cautiously in. He was turning it into every corner, but finally he focused it on the desk. I heard him speak to one of his companions, who came into the beam of light and started to pick the lock. And it was then that I switched on every light, and closed the other door electrically. They were caught—caught like rats in a trap.”

The hunchback paused dramatically, and drained his champagne. If he was expecting any laudatory remarks on the part of his audience he was disappointed. But the Reverend Theodosius and his little Janet might have been carved out of marble, save for that ceaseless tapping by the man of his left knee. In fact, had Count Zadowa been less pleased with himself and less sure of the effect he was about to cause he might have had a premonition of coming danger. There was something almost terrifying in the big clergyman’s immobility.

“Like rats in a trap,” repeated the hunchback gloatingly. “Two men I didn’t know, and—well, you know who the other was. True he had his mask on by way of disguise, but I recognised him at once. That huge figure couldn’t be mistaken—it was the leader of the Black Gang himself.”

“And what did you do, Zadowa?”

The Reverend Theodosius’s voice was very soft.

“How did you dispose of one or all those
men so that no suspicion is likely to rest on you?"

The hunchback rubbed his hands together gleefully.

"By an act which, I think you will agree, is very nearly worthy of yourself, monsieur. To shoot was impossible—because I am not sufficiently expert with a revolver to be sure of killing them. No—nothing so ordinary as that. They saw me watching them: 'I can see his eyes, Hugh,' said one of them to the leader, and I remember suddenly that in the passage not far from where I stood were half a dozen bombs—- What is it, monsieur?"

He paused in alarm at the look on the clergyman's face as he slowly rose.

"Bombs!" he snarled. "Bombs! Tell me what you did, you dreg!"

"Why," stammered the frightened hunchback, "I threw one into the room. I no longer wanted it as an office, and ... Ah, heaven, don’t murder me! ... What have I done?"

His words died away in a dreadful gurgle, as the clergyman, his face diabolical with fury, sprang on him and gripped him by the throat. He shook the hunchback as a terrier shakes a rat, cursing horribly under his breath—and for a moment or two it seemed as if the other's fear was justified. There was murder in the big man's face, until the touch of the girl's hand on his arm steadied him and brought him to his senses. With a last spasm of fury he hurled the wretched Zadowa into a corner, and left him lying there; then his iron self-control came back to him.
"Get up," he ordered tensely, "and answer some questions."

Trembling all over, the hunchback staggered to his feet and came into the centre of the room.

"Monsieur," he whined, "I do not understand. What have I done?"

"You don't need to understand!" snarled the clergyman. "Tell me exactly what happened when the bomb burst."

"It killed the three men, monsieur," stammered the other.

"Curse the three men!" He lifted his clenched fist, and Zadowa shrank back. "What happened to the room?"

"It was wrecked utterly. A great hole was blown in the wall."

"And what happened to the desk?"

"I don't know exactly, monsieur," stammered the other. "I didn't go back to see. But it must have been blown to matchwood. Only as there was nothing inside of importance it makes no odds."

"Did you look in the secret drawer at the back of the centre opening? You didn't know there was one, did you? Only I knew of its existence, and short of taking the desk to pieces no one would be able to find it. And you took the desk to pieces, Zadowa, didn't you? You blew it to pieces, Zadowa, didn't you? Just to kill the leader of this trumpery gang, Zadowa, you cursed fool!"

Step by step the hunchback was retreating before the other, terror convulsing his face, until the wall brought him to an abrupt stop.
"You blew the desk to pieces, Zadowa," continued the Reverend Theodosius standing in front of him, "a desk that contained the six most perfect diamonds in the world, Zadowa. With your wretched bomb, you worm, you destroyed a fortune. What have you got to say?"

"I didn't know, monsieur," cringed the other. "How could I know? When were they put there?"

"I put them there this afternoon for safety. Not in my wildest imagination did I dream that you would start throwing bombs about the place."

"Perhaps they are not destroyed," stammered the hunchback hopefully.

"In which case they are now in the hands of the police. You have one chance, Zadowa, and only one. It is that those diamonds are in the hands of the police. If they are and you can get them—I will say no more."

"But if they have been destroyed, monsieur?" muttered the other.

"Then, Zadowa, I am afraid you will share their fate."

Almost indifferently the clergyman turned back into the room, taking no notice whatever of the wretched man who followed him on his knees begging for mercy. And then after a while the hunchback pulled himself together and stood up.

"It was a mistake, monsieur," he said quietly, "which I deeply regret. It was, however, you must admit, hardly my fault. I will do my best."
"Let us hope, then, for your sake, Zadowa, that your best will be successful. Now go."

He pointed to the door, and without another word the hunchback went.

"I'm glad you were here to-night, my dear," remarked the Reverend Theodosius. "I don't often lose my temper, but I very nearly killed that man this evening." The girl rose and came over to where he was standing.

"I don't understand, mon chéri," she said quietly. "What diamonds are these you talk about?"

The man gave a short, hard laugh.

"I didn't tell you," he answered. "There was no object in your knowing for a time. I know your weakness where jewels are concerned too well, my dear; I got them the night before last in Amsterdam. Do you remember that Russian—Stanovitch? That wasn't his real name. He was the eldest son of the Grand Duke Georgius, and he had just arrived from Russia."

"The man who took that overdose of his sleeping-draught?" whispered the girl barely above her breath.

The Reverend Theodosius smiled grimly.

"So they decided," he remarked. "He confided in me the night before he came to his sad end what he had been doing in Russia. His father had hidden the family heirlooms from the Bolshevists, and our young friend went over to retrieve them. Most ingenious—the way he got them out of Russia. Such a pity he had a lapse with his sleep dope."
And now the Reverend Theodosius was snarling like a mad dog.

"By heavens, girl—do you wonder that I nearly killed that fool Zadowa? The coup of a lifetime—safely brought off. Not a trace of suspicion on me—not a trace. I know I said I wasn’t over here on side-shows, but I couldn’t have been expected to let such a chance slip by. And then, after having got them safely into this country to lose them like that. Why, do you know that one of them was the rose diamond of the Russian Crown jewels?"

The girl’s eyes glistened, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"They would have been unsaleable, mon ami," she said quietly.

"Don’t you believe it," snapped the other. "There are markets for anything in this world, if one takes the trouble to look for them."

He was pacing up and down the room, and for a while she stood watching him in silence.

"I’m glad I didn’t know about them till now," she said at length. "I might not have stopped you killing him, if I had. And it would have been rather awkward."

He gave a short laugh, and threw the end of his cigar into the grate.

"No good crying over spilt milk, my dear. Let’s go to bed."

But little Janet still stood by the table watching him thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about a rather peculiar coincidence," she answered quietly. "You were too worried over the diamonds to notice
it—but it struck me instantly. The leader of this gang—this huge man whom Zadówka killed to-night. Did you notice what his Christian name was?"

The Reverend Theodosius shook his head.

"It was Hugh—Zadówka heard one of the others call him by name. Hugh, mon ami; Hugh—and a huge man. A coincidence, I think."

The man gave a short laugh.

"A very long one, my dear. Too long to bother about."

"It would be a pity if he was dead," she went on thoughtfully. "I would have liked to see my Hugh Drummond again."

"If he has been killed, if your supposition is correct," returned the man, "it will do something towards reconciling me to the loss of the diamonds. But I don’t think it’s likely. And incidentally he is the only side-show I am going to allow myself during this trip."

Little Janet laughed softly.

"I wonder," she said, "I wonder. Let us, as you say, go to bed."