



The Black Gang

A Sequel to Bulldog Drummond.
BY CYRIL MCNEILE SAPPER
W.R.L. Service

SYNOPSIS

CHAPTER I.—To a gathering of anarchists in Barking, London suburb, Zaboleff, foreign agitator, tells of the operations of a body of men who have become a menace to their activities. He is interrupted by the men he is describing (the Black Gang), who break up the meeting, sentencing some of the participants to condign punishment and carrying away others. A memorandum found on Zaboleff gives an address in Hoxton, London, which the leader of the attacking party considers of importance.

CHAPTER II.—Sir Bryan Johnstone, director of criminal investigation, hears from Inspector Melver, sent to arrest Zaboleff the night before, of his discomfiture. He had been seized and chloroformed and his raid frustrated. Hugh Drummond, man of letters and old friend of Johnstone's, arrives and tells of seeing the kidnappers and their victims. He becomes an unpaid agent of the police, to be under the direction of Melver, and takes up his duties at once.

CHAPTER III.

In Which a Bomb Bursts at Unpleasantly Close Quarters.

NUMBER 5, Green street, Hoxton, was not a prepossessing abode. A notice on one of the dingy downstairs windows announced that Mr. William Atkinson was prepared to advance money on suitable security; a visit during business hours revealed that this was no more than the truth.

The second and third floors were apparently occupied by the staff, which seemed unduly large considering the locality of his business. Hoxton is hardly in that part of London where large sums of money might be expected to change hands, and yet there was no doubt that Mr. William Atkinson's staff was both large and busy. So busy, indeed, were his clerks that frequently ten and eleven o'clock at night found them still working hard, though actual business of the day downstairs concluded at six o'clock—eight, Saturdays.

It was just before closing time on the day after the strange affair down at Barking that a large, unkempt-looking individual presented himself at Mr. Atkinson's office. His most pressing need would have seemed to the casual observer to be soap and water, but his appearance apparently excited no surprise in the assistant downstairs. Possibly Hoxton is tolerant of such trifles.

The clerk—a pale, anemic-looking man with an unhealthy skin and a hook nose—rose wearily from his seat.

"What do you want?" he demanded morosely.

"Wot d'yer think?" retorted the other. "Cat's meat?"

The clerk recoiled, and the blood mounted angrily to his sallow face.

"Don't you use that tone with me, my man," he said angrily. "I'd have you to know that this is my office."

"Yus," answered the other. "Same as it's your nose sitting there like a lump of putty onto a suet pudding. And if I've any of your lip, I'll pull it off—see. Throw it outside, I will, and you after it—you parboiled lump of bad trips. Nah—then—business." With a blow that shook the office he thumped the desk with a huge fist. "I ain't got no time to waste—even if you 'ave. Ow much?"

He threw a pair of thick, hobnailed boots onto the counter, and stood glaring at the other.

"Two bob," said the clerk indifferently, throwing down a coin and picking up the boots.

"Two bob!" cried the other wrathfully. "Two bob, you miserable sheeny." For a moment or two he spluttered inarticulately as if speech was beyond him; then his huge hand shot out and gripped the clerk by the collar. "Think again, Archibald," he continued quietly, "think again and think better."

But the assistant, as might be expected in one of his calling, was prepared for emergencies of this sort. Very gently his right hand slid along the counter toward a concealed electric bell which communicated with the staff upstairs. It fulfilled several purposes, that bell: it acted as a call for help or as a warning, and according to the number of times it was pressed, the urgency of the matter could be interpreted by those who heard it. Just now the clerk decided that two rings would meet the case: he disliked the appearance of the large and angry man in whose grip he felt absolutely powerless, and he felt he would like help—very urgent. And so it was perhaps a little unfortunate for him that he should have allowed an ugly little smirk to adorn his lips a second or two before his hand found the bell. The man facing him across the counter saw that smirk and lost his temper in earnest. With a grunt of rage he hit the other square between the eyes, and the clerk collapsed in a hunched heap behind the counter with the bell still unring.

For a few moments the big man stood motionless, listening intently. Then, with an agility remarkable in one so big, he vaulted the counter and inspected the recumbent assistant with a professional eye. A faint grin spread over his face as he noted that gentleman's condition, but after that he wasted no time. So quickly and methodically in fact did he not about things, that it seemed as if the whole performance must have been cut and dried beforehand, even to the temporary indisposition of the

clerk. In half a minute the latter was bound and gagged and under the counter. Beside him the big man placed the pair of boots, attached to which was a piece of paper which he took from his pocket. On it was scrawled in an illiterate hand:

"Have took a fare price for the boots, yer swine." Then quite deliberately the big man forced the till and removed some money, after which he once more examined the unconscious man under the counter.

"Without a hitch," he muttered. "Absolutely according to Cocker. Now, old lad of the village, welcome to the second item on the program. That must be the door I want."

He opened it cautiously, and the subdued hum of voices from above came a little louder to his ears. Then like a shadow he vanished into the semi-darkness of the house upstairs.

It was undoubtedly a house of surprises, was Number 5, Green street. A stranger passing through the dingy office of the ground floor where Mr. Atkinson's assistant was wont to sit at the receipt of custom, and then ascending the stairs to the first story would have found it hard to believe that he was in the same house. But then, strangers were not encouraged to do anything of the sort.

There was a door at the top of the flight of stairs, and it was at this door that the metamorphosis took place. On one side of the stairs ran carpetless and none too clean to the ground floor, on the other side the picture changed. A wide passage with rooms leading out of it from either side confronted the explorer—a passage which was efficiently illuminated with electric lights hung from the ceiling, and the floor of which was covered with a good plain carpet. Along the walls ran rows of bookshelves stretching, save for the gaps at the doors, as far as a partition which closed the further end of the passage. In this partition was another door, and beyond this second door the passage continued to a window tightly shuttered and bolted. From this continuation only one room led off—a room which would have made the explorer rub his eyes in surprise. It was richly—almost luxuriously furnished. In the center stood a big roll top desk, while scattered about were several chairs upholstered in green leather. A long table filled one side of the room: a table covered with every imaginable newspaper. A huge safe flush with the wall occupied the other side, while the window, like the one outside, was almost hermetically sealed. There was a fireplace in the corner but there was no sign of any fire having been lit, or of any preparations for lighting one. Two electric heaters attached by long lengths of flex to plugs in the wall, comprised the heating arrangements, while a big central light and a half-dozen movable ones illuminated every corner of the room.

In blissful ignorance of the sad plight of the clerk below, two men were sitting in this room, deep in conversation. In a chair drawn up close to the desk was no less a person than Charles Latter, M. P., and it was he who was doing most of the talking. But it was the other man who riveted attention: the man who presumably was Mr. Atkinson himself.

At first he seemed to be afflicted with an almost phenomenal stoop, and it was only when one got nearer that the reason was clear. The man was a hunchback, and the effect it gave was that of a huge bird of prey. Unlike most hunchbacks, his legs were of normal length, and as he sat motionless in his chair, a hand on each knee, staring with unwinking eyes at his talkative companion, there was something menacing and implacable in his appearance. His hair was gray; his features stern and hard; while his mouth reminded one of a steel trap. But it was his eyes that dominated everything—gray-blue and piercing, they seemed able to probe one's innermost soul. A man to whom it would be unwise to lie—a man utterly unscrupulous in himself, who would yet punish double-dealing in those who worked for him with merciless severity. A dangerous man.

"So you went to the police, Mr. Latter," he remarked suavely. "And what had our friend Sir Bryan Johnstone to say on the matter?"

"At first, count, he didn't say much. In fact he really said very little all through. But once he looked at the note his whole manner changed. There was something about the note which interested him."

"Let me see it," said the count, holding out his hand.

"I left it with Sir Bryan," answered the other. "He asked me to let him keep it. And he promised that I should be all right."

The count's lip curled.

"It would take more than Sir Bryan Johnstone's promise, Mr. Latter, to insure your safety. Do you know whom that note was from?"

"I thought, count," said the other a little tremulously—"I thought it might be from this mysterious Black Gang that one has heard rumors about."

"It was," replied the count tersely.

"Heavens!" stammered Latter.

"Then it's true; they exist."

count merely paced through the safe door and vanished through his private boot-hole, leaving everything in darkness. And should inconvenient visitors ask inconvenient questions—well, it was Mr. Atkinson's private office, and a very nice office, too, though at the moment he was away.

Thus the procedure was simple and sound; but on this occasion something seemed to have gone wrong. Instead of the industrious silence of clerks working overtime on affairs of financial import, a perfect babel of voices became audible in the passage. And then there came an agitated knocking on the door.

"Who is it?" cried the count sharply. It may be mentioned that even the most influential members of his staff knew better than to come into the room without previously obtaining permission.

"It's me, sir—Cohen," came an agitated voice from outside.

For a moment the count paused; then with a turn of the knob he closed the safe door silently. With an imperious hand he waved Latter to a chair, and resumed his former position at the desk.

"Come in," he snapped.

It was a strange and unwholesome object that obeyed the order, and the count sat back in his chair.

"What the devil have you been doing?"

A pair of rich blue-black eyes, and a nose from which traces of blood still trickled, had not improved the general appearance of the assistant downstairs. In one hand he carried a pair of hobnailed boots, in the other a piece of paper, and he brandished them alternately while a flood of incoherent frenzy burst from his lips.

For a minute or two the count listened, until his first look of surprise gave way to one of black anger.

"Am I to understand, you wretched little worm," he snarled, "that you gave the urgency danger signal, not once, but half a dozen times merely because a man hit you over the nose?"

"But he knocked me silly, sir," quavered the other. "And when I came to, and saw the boots lying beside me and the till opened, I kind of lost my head, I didn't know what had happened, sir—and I thought I'd better ring the bell—in case of trouble."

He retreated a step or two toward the door, terrified out of his wits by the look of diabolical fury in the hunchback's eyes. Three or four clerks, who had been surreptitiously

peeking through the open door, melted rapidly away, while from his chair Mr. Latter watched the scene fascinated. He was reminded of a bird and a snake, and suddenly he gave a little shudder as he realized that his own position was in reality much the same as that of the unfortunate Cohen.

And then just as the tension was becoming unbearable there came the interruption. Outside in the passage clear and distinct, there sounded twice the hoot of an owl. To Mr. Latter it meant nothing; but to the count the effect was electrical. With a quickness incredible in one so deformed he was at the door, and into the passage, hurling Cohen out of his way into a corner. His powerful fists were clenched by his side; the veins in his neck were standing out like whipcord. But to Mr. Latter's surprise he made no movement, and rising from his chair he, too, peered round the corner along the passage, only to stagger back after a second or two with a feeling of sick fear in his soul, and a sudden dryness in the throat. For twenty yards away, framed in the doorway at the head of the stairs leading down to the office below, he had seen a huge, motionless figure. For a perceptible time he had stared at it, and it had seemed to stare at him. Then the door had shut, and on the other side a key had turned. And the figure had been draped from head to foot in black.

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 was an undoubted 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 realized himself for what he was—a thing of no account. And the realization was as gall and wormwood to his soul. It is a realization which comes to many men and it takes them different ways. Some become rekindled—some make new and even more

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(To Be Continued.)

Lexington Student Is Initiated in Fraternity

Oregon Agricultural College, Corvallis, Jan. 9.—Dallas C. Ward of Lexington was initiated into Kappa Phi Delta, local professional fraternity in education for men, Wednesday. Six other men were initiated. Mr. Ward is a junior in vocational education and a member of Phi Delta Theta social fraternity.

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