

Chapter 30

The Brigands hold a Council of War

It being now what is usually called the festive season--possibly because at this period of the year a greater number of people are suffering from hunger and cold than at any other time--the reader will not be surprised at being invited to another little party which took place on the day after the one we have just left. The scene was Mr Sweater's office. Mr Sweater was seated at his desk, but with his chair swung round to enable him to face his guests--Messrs Rushton, Didlum, and Grinder, who were also seated.

'Something will 'ave to be done, and that very soon,' Grinder was saying. 'We can't go on much longer as we're doing at present. For my part, I think the best thing to do is to chuck up the sponge at once; the company is practically bankrupt now, and the longer we waits the worser it will be.'

'That's just my opinion,' said Didlum dejectedly. 'If we could supply the electric light at the same price as gas, or a little cheaper, we might have some chance; but we can't do it. The fact is that the machinery we've got is no dam good; it's too small and it's wore out, consequently the light we supply is inferior to gas and costs more.'

'Yes, I think we're fairly beaten this time,' said Rushton. 'Why, even

if the Gas Coy hadn't moved their works beyond the borough boundary, still we shouldn't 'ave been hable to compete with 'em.'

'Of course not,' said Grinder. 'The truth of the matter is just wot Didlum says. Our machinery is too small, it's worn hout, and good for nothing but to be throwed on the scrap-heap. So there's only one thing left to do and that is--go into liquidation.'

'I don't see it,' remarked Sweater.

'Well, what do you propose, then?' demanded Grinder. 'Reconstruct the company? Ask the shareholders for more money? Pull down the works and build fresh, and buy some new machinery? And then most likely not make a do of it after all? Not for me, old chap! I've 'ad enough. You won't catch me chuckin' good money after bad in that way.'

'Nor me neither,' said Rushton.

'Dead orf!' remarked Didlum, very decidedly.

Sweater laughed quietly. 'I'm not such a fool as to suggest anything of that sort,' he said. 'You seem to forget that I am one of the largest shareholders myself. No. What I propose is that we Sell Out.'

'Sell out!' replied Grinder with a contemptuous laugh in which the others joined. 'Who's going to buy the shares of a concern that's practically bankrupt and never paid a dividend?'

'I've tried to sell my little lot several times already,' said Didlum with a sickly smile, 'but nobody won't buy 'em.'

'Who's to buy?' repeated Sweater, replying to Grinder. 'The municipality of course! The ratepayers. Why shouldn't Mugsborough go in for Socialism as well as other towns?'

Rushton, Didlum and Grinder fairly gasped for breath: the audacity of the chief's proposal nearly paralysed them.

'I'm afraid we should never git away with it,' ejaculated Didlum, as soon as he could speak. 'When the people tumbled to it, there'd be no hend of a row.'

'PEOPLE! ROW!' replied Sweater, scornfully. 'The majority of the people will never know anything about it! Listen to me--'

'Are you quite sure as we can't be over'eard?' interrupted Rushton, glancing nervously at the door and round the office.

'It's all right,' answered Sweater, who nevertheless lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and the others drew their chairs closer and bent forward to listen.

'You know we still have a little money in hand: well, what I propose is this: At the annual meeting, which, as you know, comes off next week,

we'll arrange for the Secretary to read a highly satisfactory report, and we'll declare a dividend of 15 per cent--we can arrange it somehow between us. Of course, we'll have to cook the accounts a little, but I'll see that it's done properly. The other shareholders are not going to ask any awkward questions, and we all understand each other.'

Sweater paused, and regarded the other three brigands intently. 'Do you follow me?' he asked.

'Yes, yes,' said Didlum eagerly. 'Go on with it.' And Rushton and Grinder nodded assent.

'Afterwards,' resumed Sweater, 'I'll arrange for a good report of the meeting to appear in the Weekly Ananias. I'll instruct the Editor to write it himself, and I'll tell him just what to say. I'll also get him to write a leading article about it, saying that electricity is sure to supersede gas for lighting purposes in the very near future. Then the article will go on to refer to the huge profits made by the Gas Coy and to say how much better it would have been if the town had bought the gasworks years ago, so that those profits might have been used to reduce the rates, the same as has been done in other towns. Finally, the article will declare that it's a great pity that the Electric Light Supply should be in the hands of a private company, and to suggest that an effort be made to acquire it for the town.

'In the meantime we can all go about--in a very quiet and judicious way, of course--bragging about what a good thing we've got, and saying

we don't mean to sell. We shall say that we've overcome all the initial expenses and difficulties connected with the installation of the works--that we are only just beginning to reap the reward of our industry and enterprise, and so on.

'Then,' continued the Chief, 'we can arrange for it to be proposed in the Council that the Town should purchase the Electric Light Works.'

'But not by one of us four, you know,' said Grinder with a cunning leer.

'Certainly not; that would give the show away at once. There are, as you know--several members of the Band who are not shareholders in the company; we'll get some of them to do most of the talking. We, being the directors of the company, must pretend to be against selling, and stick out for our own price; and when we do finally consent we must make out that we are sacrificing our private interests for the good of the Town. We'll get a committee appointed--we'll have an expert engineer down from London--I know a man that will suit our purpose admirably--we'll pay him a trifle and he'll say whatever we tell him to--and we'll rush the whole business through before you can say "Jack Robinson", and before the rate-payers have time to realize what's being done. Not that we need worry ourselves much about them. Most of them take no interest in public affairs, but even if there is something said, it won't matter much to us once we've got the money. It'll be a nine days' wonder and then we'll hear no more of it.'

As the Chief ceased speaking, the other brigands also remained silent,

speechless with admiration of his cleverness.

'Well, what do you think of it?' he asked.

'Think of it!' cried Grinder, enthusiastically. 'I think it's splendid! Nothing could be better. If we can honly git away with it, I reckon it'll be one of the smartest thing we've ever done.'

'Smart ain't the word for it,' observed Rushton.

'There's no doubt it's a grand idear!' exclaimed Didlum, 'and I've just thought of something else that might be done to help it along. We could arrange to 'ave a lot of letters sent "To the Editor of the Obscurer" and "To the Editor of the Ananias," and "To the Editor of the Weekly Chloroform" in favour of the scheme.'

'Yes, that's a very good idea,' said Grinder. 'For that matter the editors could write them to themselves and sign them "Progress", "Ratepayer", "Advance Mugsborough", and sich-like.'

'Yes, that's all right,' said the Chief, thoughtfully, 'but we must be careful not to overdo it; of course there will have to be a certain amount of publicity, but we don't want to create too much interest in it.'

'Come to think of it,' observed Rushton arrogantly, 'why should we trouble ourselves about the opinion of the ratepayers at all? Why

should we trouble to fake the books, or declare a dividend or 'ave the harticles in the papers or anything else? We've got the game in our own 'ands; we've got a majority in the Council, and, as Mr Sweater ses, very few people even take the trouble to read the reports of the meetings.'

'Yes, that's right enough,' said Grinder. 'But it's just them few wot would make a lot of trouble and talk; THEY'RE the very people we 'as to think about. If we can only manage to put THEM in a fog we'll be all right, and the way to do it is as Mr Sweater proposes.'

'Yes, I think so,' said the Chief. 'We must be very careful. I can work it all right in the Ananias and the Chloroform, and of course you'll see that the Obscurer backs us up.'

'I'll take care of that,' said Grinder, grimly.

The three local papers were run by limited companies. Sweater held nearly all the shares of the Ananias and of the Weekly Chloroform, and controlled their policy and contents. Grinder occupied the same position with regard to the Obscurer. The editors were a sort of marionettes who danced as Sweater and Grinder pulled the strings.

'I wonder how Dr Weakling will take it?' remarked Rushton.

'That's the very thing I was just thinkin' about,' cried Didlum. 'Don't you think it would be a good plan if we could arrange to 'ave somebody

took bad--you know, fall down in a fit or something in the street just outside the Town 'All just before the matter is brought forward in the Council, and then 'ave someone to come and call 'im out to attend to the party wot's ill, and keep 'im out till the business is done.'

'Yes, that's a capital idear,' said Grinder thoughtfully. 'But who could we get to 'ave the fit? It would 'ave to be someone we could trust, you know.'

'Ow about Rushton? You wouldn't mind doin' it, would yer?' inquired Didlum.

'I should strongly object,' said Rushton haughtily. He regarded the suggestion that he should act such an undignified part, as a kind of sacrilege.

'Then I'll do it meself if necessary,' said Didlum. 'I'm not proud when there's money to be made; anything for an honest living.'

'Well, I think we're all agreed, so far,' remarked Sweater. The others signified assent.

'And I think we all deserve a drink,' the Chief continued, producing a decanter and a box of cigars from a cupboard by the side of his desk.

'Pass that water bottle from behind you, Didlum.'

'I suppose nobody won't be comin' in?' said the latter, anxiously. 'I'm

a teetotaler, you know.'

'Oh, it's all right,' said Sweater, taking four glasses out of the cupboard and pouring out the whisky. 'I've given orders that we're not to be disturbed for anyone. Say when.'

'Well, 'ere's success to Socialism,' cried Grinder, raising his glass, and taking a big drink.

'Amen--'ear, 'ear, I mean,' said Didlum, hastily correcting himself.

'Wot I likes about this 'ere business is that we're not only doin' ourselves a bit of good,' continued Grinder with a laugh, 'we're not only doin' ourselves a bit of good, but we're likewise doin' the Socialists a lot of 'arm. When the ratepayers 'ave bought the Works, and they begins to kick up a row because they're losin' money over it--we can tell 'em that it's Socialism! And then they'll say that if that's Socialism they don't want no more of it.'

The other brigands laughed gleefully, and some of Didlum's whisky went down the wrong way and nearly sent him into a fit.

'You might as well kill a man at once,' he protested as he wiped the tears from his eyes, 'you might as well kill a man at once as choke 'im to death.'

'And now I've got a bit of good news for you,' said the Chief as he put

his empty glass down.

The others became serious at once.

'Although we've had a very rough time of it in our contest with the Gasworks Company, and although we've got the worst of it, it hasn't been all lavender for them, you know. They've not enjoyed themselves either: we hit them pretty hard when we put up the coal dues.'

'A damn good job too,' said Grinder malignantly.

'Well,' continued Sweater, 'they're just as sick of the fight as they want to be, because of course they don't know exactly how badly we've been hit. For all they know, we could have continued the struggle indefinitely: and--well, to make a long story short, I've had a talk with the managing director and one or two others, and they're willing to let us in with them. So that we can put the money we get for the Electric Light Works into gas shares!'

This was such splendid news that they had another drink on the strength of it, and Didlum said that one of the first things they would have to do would be to totally abolish the Coal Dues, because they pressed so hard on the poor.