

The Man Who Was Thursday (Excerpt)
Adapted by Bilal Dardai from the novel by G.K. Chesterton



Through the next exchange, GREGORY and SYME may travel anywhere in the theater. GREGORY will periodically light matches as they travel, dropping any that go out and then lighting another.

GREGORY

Are you beginning to understand my seriousness yet, sir?

SYME

I understand nothing. Subterranean tunnels speak to very many peculiar character traits, but I do not believe that serious anarchism is one of them.

GREGORY

We are not there yet. You will see, once we are there.

SYME

Mind you, this is a very unusual environment for any mere poet to inhabit. Excepting, perhaps, *Byron*...

GREGORY

Suffice to say that I am breaking a very strict oath of secrecy in bringing you here. I can't explain to you in any sensible way why I have done it; it's one of those arbitrary emotions, like jumping off a cliff or falling in love. But you, sir, have so intolerably irritated me that I would break twenty such oaths for the pleasure of taking you down a peg.

SYME

You flatter me. In better light, I am sure you would see me flush with embarrassment.

They travel in silence for a moment.

SYME

So this is how one goes about abolishing government, then?

GREGORY

No, this is how one goes about abolishing God!

They are standing onstage again. There is suddenly a wash of white light, and they are standing in a cold, black room. There is a large, round, wooden council table in the center, and the back wall is covered with ball-shaped bombs and miscellaneous firearms. It is a very impressive arsenal. There is a cloak, revolver, and sword-stick on the table. GREGORY pauses for effect.

SYME

How festive.

GREGORY

To abolish God, Mr. Syme. There is more to true anarchy than the abolition of despots and police regulations...we dig deeper. We erupt higher. We set out to deny all arbitrary distinctions of vice and virtue, honor and treachery, those base ideas that fuel common rebels. The silly sentimentalists of the French Revolution, how they screamed and shed blood over the so-called Rights of Man! We hate Rights and we hate Wrongs. We will abolish Right and Wrong.

SYME

And you will also abolish Right and Left, I hope? I find those far more troublesome.

GREGORY

Still you mock! Still! Even at...all this...!

SYME

No no, this is most impressive! Were I God, I would feel half-abolished already at the sight of it. (*He removes his hat and bows.*) I stand corrected, Mr. Gregory. Clearly we should all have trusted you when you confessed to be a heinous bomb-throwing fiend.

GREGORY

The dull skepticism of the masses is to be expected. In fact, I rely upon it. That is the genius of Sunday.

SYME

I beg your pardon? Sunday?

GREGORY

The President of our Central Anarchist Council. There are seven on this council, who are named after days of the week. Sunday is their leader, and ours.

SYME

A clever nomenclature.

GREGORY

A clever man. A great and terrible man.

SYME

Yet how peculiar that such a man remains unknown to the common citizen.

GREGORY

Caesar and Napoleon put all their effort into being heard of, and they *were* heard of. Sunday puts all of his effort into *not* being heard of, and he is not. But one cannot spend five minutes in a room with him without feeling that those emperors would have been children in his hands. (*Beat.*) An example. I asked him, Sunday, how I should disguise myself in society so as not to arouse suspicion. I had attempted to pass as a priest, and then as an army major...and neither charade was convincing. I understand now. Sunday made me understand. "You want a safe disguise?" he asked me. "To have nobody expect anything dangerous of you? Then *dress up as an anarchist*, you fool!"

SYME

It is a good ruse. Indeed, for as harmless as you had appeared, you must conversely be the most serious of anarchists.

GREGORY

I'm pleased to hear you say that. (*Beat.*) May I share another secret with you, Syme?

SYME

Another? I shall be overladen.

GREGORY

Tonight, in this very room, there is to be a special session to fill a vacancy on the Central Council. The gentleman who had for some time assumed the difficult role of Thursday has died quite suddenly, and a successor must be appointed immediately. There is a formal election, of course, but I don't mind telling you...that it is almost certain that I am to be Thursday.

SYME

Then I congratulate you! A great career!

GREGORY

(giddily)

A short ceremony, I am sure...I will take up the cloak and arms here upon the table, and then out of this cavern to a steam-ship waiting on the river, which will take me to the Council and then—and then—oh, the wild joy of being Thursday!

SYME

What an utterly likeable human being you are, Mr. Gregory! I am sure you will make a most pleasant villain!

GREGORY

I thank you. You have been gracious in your defeat.

SYME

Not at all. This is by far the funniest situation I have ever been in my life, and I am going to act accordingly, by God! I made you a vow of secrecy upon entering this realm of yours; would you give me, for my own safety, a similar promise?

GREGORY

A promise?

SYME

For as I have sworn not to reveal your secret to the police, would you now promise not to reveal my secret to the anarchists?

GREGORY

You have a secret?

SYME

I do. Will you swear?

Pause.

GREGORY

This damnable...*curiosity*...of artists! Yes, I will swear. I will not tell the anarchists what you tell me. But be quick about it, they will be here in a few minutes.

SYME

Well. I don't know how to tell you the truth in a more expedient manner than to say to you that your trick of dressing as an aimless poet is not unheard of outside of your circle. In fact, we have known the dodge for some time at Scotland Yard.

A very awkward silence.

GREGORY

What.

SYME

Yes. I am a police detective. Ah! I hear your friends coming.

The sound of the ANARCHISTS murmuring in the theater can be heard, growing slowly louder. GREGORY grabs the revolver off the table and points it at SYME.

SYME

Really, sir, do not be hasty.

GREGORY

But! I...a *detective!* You *dare* to...! I...!

SYME

Can't you see we're in the same boat? And jolly sea-sick, to boot!

GREGORY

I'll see you dead!

SYME

Think, man! We've checkmated each other. I'm a policeman bereft of the aid of the police, and you are an anarchist unable to reveal my identity without implicating yourself as well. Shoot me now, and you will probably find yourself beset upon with all manner of questions from your fellows, and it may be revealed that you unwittingly allowed me into your inner sanctum. At which point, I would hazard, it would be fortunate if you were merely denied the position of Thursday. (*Beat.*) But take heart! The advantage is clearly yours—you are not surrounded by police, but I am surrounded by anarchists.

GREGORY

So you propose—what, exactly? You shall attend our meeting and then simply go along your merry way?

SYME

Precisely.

GREGORY

On your merry way back to Scotland Yard!

SYME

Did I not make you a vow?

Pause. GREGORY is very confused.

GREGORY

You intend to...honor your promise?

SYME

Naturally.

GREGORY

But—!

SYME

—Mr. Gregory, you and I are representatives of a much larger struggle, that between order and chaos. I daresay that I have faith that my side will prevail well enough without such dishonorable behavior on my part. There is no need to bump the billiard table. Do you not have the same conviction in your philosophy? I thought we were serious.

Pause. GREGORY puts the revolver back on the table.

SYME

Good show, sir.

The ANARCHISTS enter the room from all sides available. They are dressed in black, cruel overcoats. They take seats at the table, whispering to each other. One of these men is BUTTONS. He holds a small legal folder filled with paper, and approaches SYME and GREGORY suspiciously.

BUTTONS

Comrade Gregory.

GREGORY
(nervously)

Well met, Comrade Buttons.

BUTTONS

And is this man a delegate?

GREGORY

Er...yes, a delegate.

SYME

Your gate is so well guarded, sir; it would be hard for anybody who was not a delegate to be here. *(He extends his hand.)* Gabriel Syme.

BUTTONS

And which branch do you represent?

SYME

No branch. Moreso a root. *(Beat.)* You might call me a Sabbatarian. I am here to see that you show a due observance of Sunday.

All whispering abruptly stops, and the ANARCHISTS look at SYME. BUTTONS drops his folder, and then abruptly scurries to pick the papers up.

BUTTONS

I...oh...I see. We should...of course...we should give you a seat at the meeting?

SYME

Oh, I think you'd better.

There is a mad scramble to get a seat for SYME. He directs it off to the side, away from the cluster at the table. Everybody watches him, anxious, as he sits. Finally, he nods to the ANARCHISTS and observes, quietly. GREGORY watches all of this with frustration. BUTTONS stands at the head of table, standing on a step slightly higher than the ANARCHISTS.

BUTTONS

It is...ahem. It is time we began. The steam-ship is waiting already. Our meeting tonight is important, but it need not be long. It is the honor of this branch to select a new Thursday. We all lament the passing of the heroic worker who occupied that chair until last week. His services to the cause were considerable. Most notably, as you all remember, he organized the dynamite coup of Brighton, which, under happier circumstances, would have killed everybody on the pier.

ANARCHISTS

Hear, hear!

BUTTONS

But alas, we are not here to acclaim the virtues of that worthy dynamiter, but for the harder task of replacing him. Out of our company here tonight, we must unanimously select the man who would be Thursday. Present a nominee and we shall put him to the vote.

ANARCHIST #1

(standing)

I move that Comrade Gregory be elected Thursday.

BUTTONS

Second?

ANARCHIST #2

Second.

BUTTONS

Lucian! Please approach.

GREGORY walks quickly to BUTTONS' side.

BUTTONS

Before we vote, I ask that our nominee make a statement. Do you have one prepared?

GREGORY

I do. *(He pulls a speech from his jacket and orates to the ANARCHISTS.)* My brothers in gunpowder. I do not need to explain my policy. It is *your* policy. We have been slandered in society, our aims have been misinterpreted and disfigured. People learn of anarchism from six-penny novels, or from newspapers, or from half-wit conversations in hotel parlors. They never learn anarchy from *anarchists*. And why, I ask you? Because we are persecuted, because we are forced to assemble underground. Because we are *demonized* by those ignorant masses above us, who fail to understand the better world we are trying to create. No more, say I! As your Thursday, I will destroy the walls within the mind of society as well as the walls without. I will blow their eyes open! They will see at last what anarchy offers, they will see that we are more than murderers and enemies of human society. There will be no slander—we will pursue with courage, and intellectual pressure, the permanent ideals of brotherhood that are inherent in anarchy. I thank you for your confidence, comrades.

He stands before them, beaming. There is a smattering of polite applause and murmuring. BUTTONS steps next to GREGORY, smiling halfheartedly.

BUTTONS

Yes. Well. Good speech, anyway. Ahem. (*To the ANARCHISTS.*) Does anyone oppose the election of Comrade Gregory?

A moment of quiet discussion among the ANARCHISTS. The air is of resignation.

SYME

Yes, Mr. Buttons. I oppose.

Everybody looks over.

BUTTONS

The Chair recognizes Mr. Syme?

SYME stands and continues in a loud and clear voice. He walks over to the table during his speech, pushing next to GREGORY on the step, and ultimately moves to the tabletop. The ANARCHISTS voice approval where appropriate.

SYME

Have we come here for this? Do we meet underground like rats, cover our walls with bombs and bar our door with death, for such milquetoast offering as this? “Courage and intellectual pressure”? “The better world we will create?” These are fine words, yes, if one is an archbishop. If one were an archbishop, I am sure they would have listened to Comrade Gregory’s words with great pleasure! But I am *not* an archbishop, my friends, and I did *not* find any pleasure in his words. Our dear Mr. Gregory may have found pleasure in his words, and as such *he* may one day make a fine archbishop...but the man who is fit to be an archbishop is not fit to be a serious anarchist. He is not *fit* to be a forcible and efficient Thursday.

GREGORY

Now see here...

SYME

He tells us in the most *apologetic* tone that we are not the enemies of society. I say that we *are* the enemies of society, and so much the worse for society! We are society’s oldest and most pitiless enemy! We are the Anarchist! We are not murderers, true, as Mr. Gregory points out. We are *executioners*.

The ANARCHISTS cheer.

GREGORY

(stepping onto the table with SYME)

You...you damnable hypocrite!

SYME

Hypocrite, am I? He knows as well as I do that I am keeping all of my vows; doing nothing but my duty. I will not mince words. I say that Comrade Gregory, for all his amiable qualities, is not fit to be Thursday. I say that he is unfit *because* of all his amiable qualities. Should the Central Council be a place for ceremonial politeness and modesty? I set myself against his election as I set myself against all the governments of Europe, because the man who has truly embraced anarchy has forgotten modesty. He has forgotten *pride*! Am I a man? No! I am a cause! I am as impersonal and resolute as one of the weapons on this wall, and I say that rather than have Gregory and his sentimentality infect the Central Council, I would offer up *myself* for election—!

The ANARCHISTS rise as one and applaud.

GREGORY

Stop! Stop, you madmen!

SYME

I will not rebut the slander that we are murderers, I will *earn* it! To the priest who condemns our souls, to the judge who condemns our bodies, to the fat Parliamentarian who condemns our spirits, I would grip their throats and cry FALSE KINGS OF SOCIETY, MY NAME IS THURSDAY, AND I COME TO DESTROY YOU!

The ANARCHISTS are in frenzy. GREGORY is forcibly pulled off the table and pushed to the outside of the circle.

BUTTONS

Order! Order, anarchists, ORDER!

ANARCHIST #3

I move that Comrade Syme be elected to the post!

GREGORY

You cannot—!

ANARCHISTS

—Second!

GREGORY

Enough! Enough of this! This man cannot be elected, he is—

SYME

—Yes. What is he?

Pause. They stare at GREGORY.

GREGORY

He is...inexperienced...in our particular branch.

Pause. They turn away from GREGORY.

BUTTONS

We shall move to the matter of appointment. All in favor of Comrade Syme?

GREGORY rushes the table and stands upon it once more, next to a calm SYME.

GREGORY

Comrades! You must hear me! DO NOT ELECT THIS MAN! Call it madness if you must, but act upon it! Strike me down but hear my command! Kill me! But by all that we hold dear, OBEY ME!

A cold silence. The ANARCHISTS stare at GREGORY. SYME meets GREGORY'S eyes, but simply straightens his clothes and says nothing.

ANARCHISTS

(many of them grumbling)

Command...command...? Obey, he says...obey my command...of all the...obey, he says...

ANARCHIST #4

(standing)

Comrade Gregory *commands?*

ANARCHIST #5

(standing)

Who are you? *You* are not Sunday.

ANARCHIST #6

(standing)

And *you*...are not Thursday.

BUTTONS

(quietly pulling GREGORY from the table)

Really, comrade. This is not dignified. *(To the assembly.)* In favor of Comrade Syme for Thursday?

ANARCHISTS

Aye!

BUTTONS

(hands SYME the revolver and sword-stick)

The motion is carried. May you do the post of Thursday proud, sir. *(He takes the cloak and drapes it over SYME'S shoulders.)* Now, comrades, to the river! We must send off our new Thursday in all of the lusty manner that defines our class!

ANARCHISTS

Hurrah!

They rise and exit in one direction, save for GREGORY. SYME stays and looks at him.

SYME

You overestimate them, you see.

GREGORY

Do not speak to me, villain.

SYME

You are a poet, and so you remain trapped in that most indelible quality of all poets.

GREGORY

Which would be?

SYME

Idealism. You wish to destroy the world, true, but in doing so you hope to make it better. You believed that those men now waiting down by the river shared your purposes. They do not. They wish to destroy the world for no other purpose than to destroy the world.

GREGORY

What shall we do now?

SYME

Now? I take it I must step aboard some wretched steam-ship and do my best to keep my lobster down. It is unfortunate that you anarchists are so opposed to the Underground Railway.

GREGORY

Then you shall not go to Scotland Yard?

SYME

How many times must I make that promise, sir?

GREGORY

And you trust me, even now, not to reveal your identity?

SYME

Now it is far too late, you must agree. Now any such accusation would appear to be little more than spite. *(Beat.)* Still, I am grateful to you. It is exactly as you promised, Mr. Gregory.

GREGORY

Promised?!

SYME

It has been a very entertaining evening.

SYME tips his hat and exits. GREGORY is left alone onstage, fuming.

End Act One