CHAPTER II

THE COUP D'ETAT

THE Master Spirit was incapable of hesitation. In uniforms of a Cromwellian cut, designed after the most careful consideration of the proper wear for expelling legislative assemblies and made under pressure at remarkable speed, the chiefs of the Duty Paramount movement and a special body-guard armed with revolvers and swords, marched under his leadership to Westminster at the head of a great popular demonstration. The Houses of Parliament were surrounded. The police offered a half-hearted resistance, for the Metropolitan Police Commissioner was himself a strong man and could understand what was happening to the world. An attempt, essentially formal, was made to treat this historical march upon Westminster as ordinary traffic and divert it towards Chelsea; this failing, the police, in accordance with a prearranged scheme, evacuated the building, paraded in good order in Parliament Square, and marched off in Indian file, leaving the League in possession. For some minutes Miss Ellen Wilkerson offered a formidable resistance in one of the corridors, but reinforcements arrived, and she was overpowered. The "Talking Shop" had fallen.

The House of Commons was in session and did

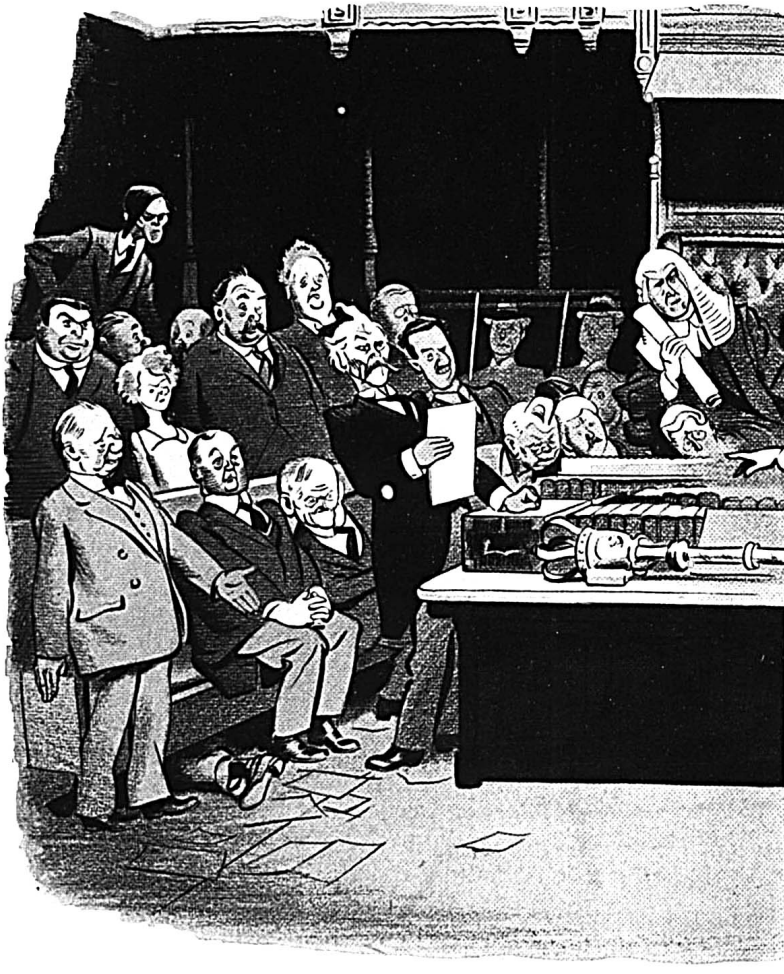
not seem to know how to get out of it. The Master Spirit, supported by the staff he had gathered about him—except Sir Bussy, who was again unaccountably missing—entered by the Strangers' entrance and came through the division lobby on to the floor of the House. At the significant brown band across the green carpet he stopped short.

The atmosphere of the place was tensely emotional as this tall and slender and yet most portentous figure, supported by the devoted lieutenants his magic had inspired, stood facing the Speaker and his two bewigged satellites. Someone had set the division bells ringing, and the House was crowded, the Labour party clustered thickly to his left, Commander Benworthy bulky and outstanding. There was little talk or noise. The great majority of the members present were silently agape. Some were indignant but many upon the right were manifestly sympathetic. Above, the attendants were attempting, but not very successfully, to clear the Strangers' and Distinguished Strangers' Galleries. The reporters stared or scribbled convulsively and there was a luminous abundance of ladies in their particular gallery.

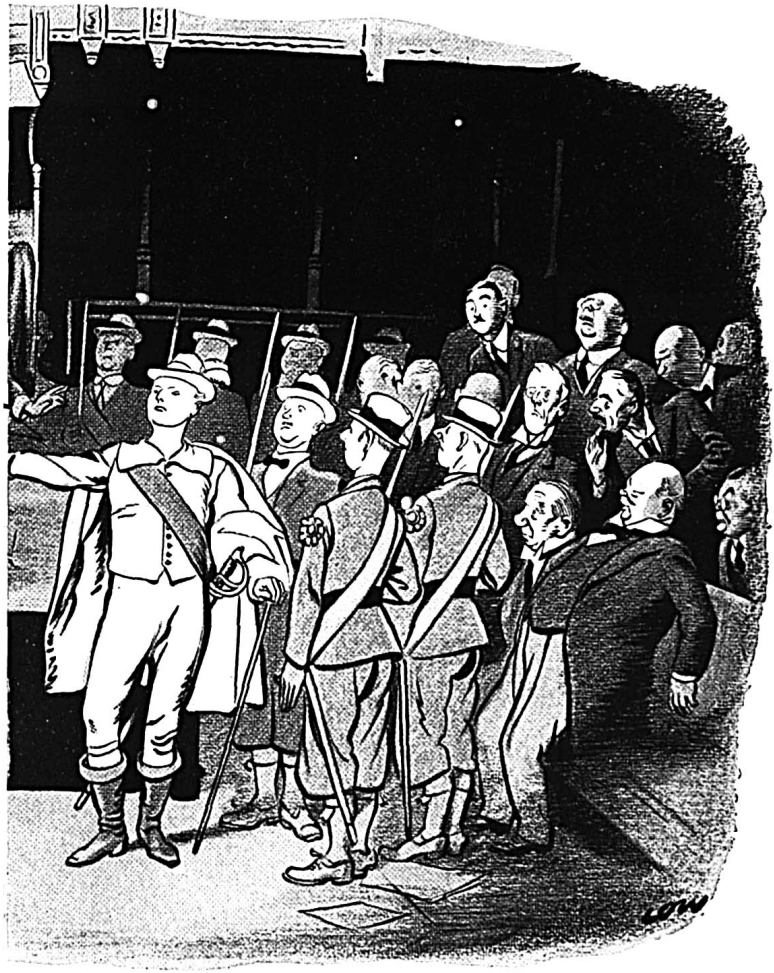
Methodical and precise as ever, the tapes in the dining- and smoking-rooms had announced, "Dictator enters House with armed force. Business in suspense," and had then ceased their useful function. From behind the Speaker's chair a couple of score of the bodyguard, with swords drawn, had spread out to the left and right and stood now at the salute.

It would have needed a soul entirely devoid of imagination to ignore the profound historical significance of this occasion, and the Master was of imagination all compact. His stern determination was mellowed but not weakened by a certain element of awe at his own immense achievement. To this House, if not to this particular chamber, Charles the First had come in pursuit of the tragic destiny that was to bring him to Whitehall; and after him, to better effect had come Cromwell, the great precursor of the present event. Here, through a thousand scenes of storm and conflict, the mighty fabric of the greatest empire the world had ever seen had been welded and reshaped. Here had spoken such mighty rulers and gladiators as Walpole and Pelham, Pitt and Burke, Peel and Palmerston, Gladstone and Disraeli. And now this once so potent assembly had waxed vulgar, senile, labourist, garrulous and ineffective, and the day of rejuvenescence, the restoration of the Phœnix, was at hand. The eyes of the Master Spirit, grave and a little sorrowful, were lifted as if for guidance to the fretted roof and then fell thoughtfully upon the mace, "that bauble," which lay athwart the table before him. He seemed to muse for a moment upon the mighty task he had undertaken, before he addressed himself to the wigged and robed figure at the head of the assembly.

"Mr. Speaker," he said, "I must ask you to leave the chair." He turned half-face to the government benches. "Gentlemen, the Ministers of the Crown, I would advise you to yield your



" The Master Spirit . . . turning slowly, ordered



and motioned his guards to clear the House."

portfolios without demur to my secretaries. For the good of His Majesty's realm and the needs of our mighty Empire I must for a time take these things over from you. When England has found her soul again, when her health has been restored, then all her ancient liberties of speech and counsel will return to her again."

For a perceptible interval everyone present might have been a waxwork image, so still and intent did they all stand. It might have been some great historical tableau set out at Madame Tussaud's. It seemed already history, and for all the length of that pause it was as if the Lord Paramount were rather witnessing what he had done than actually doing it. It became flattened but bright like a coloured picture in a child's book of history. . . .

The action of the piece was resumed by a little significant detail. Two bodyguards came forward and placed themselves at either elbow of the Speaker.

"I protest in the name of the Commons of England," said the Speaker, standing and holding his robes ready to descend.

"Your protest is duly noted," said the Master Spirit, and turning slowly, ordered and motioned his guards to clear the House.

They did their duty without haste or violence.

On the left hand, herding thickly, was this new labour government, this association of vague idealists and socialist adventurers and its supporters. Mr. Ramsy McDougal stood against the table, as ever

a little apart from his colleagues, an image of unreadiness. Mr. Parham had only seen him on one or two occasions before, and looking at him now through the Lord Paramount's eyes, he seemed more gaunt and angular than ever, more like a lonely wind-stripped tree upon some blasted heath, more haggard and inaccurate in his questionable handsomeness. He was evidently looking about him for support. His eyes wandered appealingly to the reporters' gallery, to the opposition benches, to the ladies' gallery and to the roof that presumably veiled his God from him, and then they came back to the knots and masses of his own followers. It was clear above the general murmur that he was speaking. He made noises like a cow barking or like a dog which moos. The Lord Paramount heard himself denounced as "the spirit of unrighteousness." Then there was an appeal to "fair play." Finally something about going to "raise the fiery cross." As two of the League guards approached him, guided by the Lord Paramount's signal, his gestures which indicated a rallying place elsewhere became more emphatic. For a moment he posed tall and commanding, arm lifted, finger pointing heavenward, before he folded himself up and retired.

Behind him Sir Osbert Moses had seemed to be pleading in vain with a sheepish crowd of government supporters for some collective act of protest. Mr. Coope, the extremist, was plainly an advocate for violence, but managed nothing. For the most part these labour people seemed as usual only

anxious to find out what was considered the right thing to do and to do it as precipitately as possible. The attendants gave them no help, but the League guards herded them like sheep. But Mr. Philip Snowfield, very pale and angry, remained in his place, uttering what appeared to be inaudible imprecations. As the guards approached him he moved away from them towards the exit but still turned at intervals to say what were visibly disagreeable things and to thump the floor with his stick. "Mark my words," he could be heard hissing, "you fellows will be sorry for this foolery." Commander Benworthy hovered huge and protective above him. The only actual scuffle was with that left-wing desperado, Waxton, who was dealt with in accordance with the peculiar ju-jutsu of the Lord Paramount's guards. He was carried out face downwards, his hair dragging on the floor.

The other occupants of the government benches decided not to share his fate and remained vertical and unhandled in their slow retreat. Most of them sought a certain dignity of pose, and folded arms, a sideways carriage, and a certain scornfulness were popular. There was a good deal of bumping against liberals who were doing exactly the same thing at a slightly different angle. Mr. St. George went out stoutly, and as if inadvertently, his hands behind his back. It was as if he had been called away by some private concern and had failed to observe what was going on. His daughter who was also a member followed him briskly. Sir Simon John and Mr. Harold Samuel remained

whispering together and taking notes until the advancing shadows of physical expulsion were close at hand. Their gestures made it clear to everyone that they considered the Lord Paramount was acting illegally and that they were greatly pleased to score that point against him.

Many of the conservatives were frankly sympathetic with the Lord Paramount. Mr. Baldmin was not in the house, but Sir Austin Chamberland stood talking, smiling and looking on, at the side of Lady Asper, who exulted brightly and clapped her pretty hands when Waxton was tackled and overpowered. She seemed eager that more labour members should join in the fray and get similar treatment, and disappointed when they did not do so. Mr. Emery, the great fiscal imperialist, stood on a seat the better to watch proceedings and smiled broadly at the whole affair, making movements of benediction. He knew already that he was marked for the Lord Paramount's Council. The Lord Paramount, intent on such particulars, realized suddenly that he was being cheered from the opposition benches. He drew himself up to his full height and bowed gravely.

"*Who goes home?*" a voice cried; and the cry was echoed in the corridors without. It was the time-honoured cry of parliamentary dissolution, that has closed the drama of five hundred parliaments.

The Lord Paramount found himself in the handsome passage that leads from the Commons to the Lords. A solitary figure sat there, sobbing quietly.

It looked up and revealed the face of that Lord Cato, who was formerly Sir Wilfrid Jameson Jicks. "*I* ought to have done it," he whispered. "*I* ought to have done it months ago." Then his natural generosity reasserted itself and, dashing away a tear, he stood up and held out his hand frankly and brotherly to the Lord Paramount.

"You must help *me* now, for England's sake," said the Lord Paramount.