

CHAPTER VII

SIR BUSSY IS RECALCITRANT

As soon as the Lord Paramount returned to London Sir Bussy was sent for.

It was a curious encounter. These two men had had scarcely a word together in private since that marvellous evening of the Advent when the Master Spirit had come and taken Mr. Parham to himself. Yet all the time the little man had been hovering in a very curious and persistent manner in the background of the Lord Paramount's perceptions.

There was little of the tactful Parham now in the calm firm mastery with which the Lord Paramount spoke, and it was as if Sir Bussy had shrunken from his former sullen dominance to the likeness of a wary and resentful schoolboy under reproof.

The Lord Paramount was seated at his desk, lordly and serene. He was as large again as Mr. Parham. Compared with Sir Bussy he was enormous. "I want a word with you, Woodcock," he said.

The new tone.

Sir Bussy grunted faintly. No chair had been placed for him. He considered the situation, dragged one across the room, and sat down. What

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a little fellow he was! "Well?" he said ungraciously.

"I think of making you responsible for the military supplies of the Empire and particularly of non-ferrous metals, explosives, and—gas."

Straight to the point. Sir Bussy had nothing ready by way of reply. How *wordless*! A white finger pointed to him; a clear eye regarded him. "Have you any objection?"

"Large order," said Sir Bussy.

He attempted no excuse.

"It's a responsible position," the Master's voice pursued him.

"No doubt."

"I say 'responsible.'"

"I seemed to hear you say it."

The same Sir Bussy as ever.

"'Responsible' means that if these things are not forthcoming in limitless abundance on the day of need, it is *you* will answer for it."

"Wha'd' you *want* with gas?" Sir Bussy asked abruptly and unexpectedly.

"It is of vital importance."

The quick mind of the Lord Paramount leapt at once at the revealing discovery that Sir Bussy thought instantly of gas.

"But it isn't historical," said Sir Bussy. "It isn't in tradition."

"What has that to do with it?"

"Isn't all this stuff—carrying on history?"

"This stuff?"

"The military organization of the Empire,

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national and imperial ascendancy, flags, armies, frontiers, love of the Empire, devotion, sacrifice, and having a damned good go at Russia."

"Manifestly."

"What else *could* it be?" Sir Bussy reflected. "Lemme see, where were we?"

It was evident that he had been thinking profoundly by the things he had next to say.

"Well," he began, developing his premeditated argument, "then why not play your traditional game with the traditional pieces? Why drag in modern science? Use historical armies and fleets for historical destinies and leave gas and tanks and submarines out of it. If you must still play about with flags and frontiers, go back to Brown Bess and foot slogging and ten-pounder field guns and leave these modern things alone. Chemistry doesn't belong to your world. It isn't for you. It's *new*. It's out-size."

For a moment the Lord Paramount was baffled. Sir Bussy was still Sir Bussy the unexpected. Then a beautiful word came like an angel of light to the rescue. The Lord Paramount pronounced it like a charm. "Continuity," he said and leant back to observe its effect.

The intellectual elements of Mr. Parham that he had absorbed into his constitution suddenly asserted themselves. The Lord Paramount departed from his customary use of pithy and direct speech and argued a point.

"You are mentally underdeveloped, Woodcock," he went on—when he should not have gone

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on. "You are a very good fellow, but you are uneducated. Your historical imagination is that of a child of five. You have no sense of continuity whatever. All things progress by stages—*evolve*—if we must use that word. You do not understand that. It is you who are old-fashioned with your ideas of revolutions and strange new beginnings and progress that never looks back. Your brain accepts that sort of stuff because nature abhors a vacuum. Let me tell you a little secret, Sir Bussy. As one who knows something of history. There never has been a revolution in all history. There have been so-called revolutions; that is all—times when the clock struck—violent and confused periods; mere froth upon the great stream of events. Broaden down from precedent to precedent—Yes. Begin anew—No. It is the past that rules; it is the past that points us on to our assured Destinies."

"No way out, in fact?" said Sir Bussy.

"None."

"Evolve or nothing?"

"That's the law of it."

"No fresh starts?"

"Continuity."

"So the railway train had to evolve, I suppose, bit by bit, slipping its end carriages and expanding out its footboards, until it became an aeroplane, and the mainmast of the sailing ship hollowed out into a funnel and squatted close until the cook's galley became the furnace room and his kettle became a boiler. Always continuity. Eh? No

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gaps. No fresh start. Why, damn it! a child of five knows that it's only by fresh starts man can keep alive!"

The Lord Paramount stared at his adversary, regretting now that he had stooped to argue with this obstinate and obscure mentality.

"I tell you these Powers and Policies of yours are worn out and done for," Sir Bussy went on. "It's a dream you're in. A damned old dream. It wouldn't matter if you weren't sleepwalking and wandering into dangerous places. Gas and high explosives don't belong to your game. Brains don't grow at Aldershot, the soil's too sandy. They dry up there. These experts of yours, these mongrels, these soldiers who dabble in chemistry and engineering, and these engineers and chemists who dabble in soldiering, will let you down when the crash comes. . . . Soldiering's a profession of incompetents and impostors, jobbing about with engineering firms and second-rate chemical combines. . . . You won't get the stuff you want, and even if you get it, your experts won't be able to use it. Or they'll use it all wrong. . . ."

The Lord Paramount decided that there must be no more argument,

"That is for me to decide," he said. "Your rôle is to facilitate supplies in every possible way."

"And suppose I don't choose to."

"There is such a thing as treason even in peace time, Sir Bussy."

"Treason!" said Sir Bussy. "What! and axes on Tower Hill? Put the cards down. I'll see you."

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It was the first open opposition the Lord Paramount had encountered since his triumphant accession to power, and he found himself strangely perturbed. There was a tremulous quiver in his nerves, and he felt the need for self-control. Sir Bussy stood for much more than himself. An impulse to order his arrest had to be restrained. If anything of that sort was to be done it must be done as undramatically as possible. Behind him were such men as Camelford — incalculable factors.

The Lord Paramount turned his eyes to the window and regarded the fine lines of the corner of the United Services' Museum for a moment or so. How he hated Sir Bussy! Still not looking at his recalcitrant visitor he touched a little bell on his desk.

“I have given you fair warning,” he said. “You can go.”

Sir Bussy vanished instantly, leaving the faint flavour of a “Gaw” behind him.