

CHAPTER IV

A NECESSARY EXECUTION

SOMETHING obscured the Lord Paramount's mind. Clouds floated before it. Voices that had nothing to do with the course of affairs sustained some kind of commentary. Events were no longer following one another with a proper amplitude of transition. He seemed to be passing in cinematograph fashion from scene to scene. A pursuit of Sir Bussy was in progress, Gerson was hunting him, but it was no longer clear where and how these events were unfolding.

Then it would seem that Sir Bussy had been discovered hiding in Norway. He had been kidnapped amazingly by Gerson's agents and brought to Norfolk and shot. It was no time to be fussy about operations in neutral territory. And some rigorous yet indefinable necessity required that the Lord Paramount should go secretly at night to see Sir Bussy's body. He was reminded of the heroic murder of Matteotti, of the still more heroic effacement of the Duc d'Enghien by Napoleon. It is necessary that one man should die for the people. This financial Ishmaelite had to be ended in his turn. The day had come for property also to come into the scheme of duty.

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

The Lord Paramount found himself descending from his automobile at the end of a long winding and bumpy lane that led down to the beach near Sheringham. Extravagantly like Napoleon he felt; he was even wearing a hat of the traditional pattern. He had to be muffled. He was muffled in a cloak of black velvet. The head lamps showed a whitewashed shed, a boat on a bank of shingle; beyond, the breakers of an uneasy sea flashed white as they came out of the blue-grey indistinctness into the cone of lights. "This way, sir," said a young officer and made his path more difficult by the officious flicking of an electric torch. The shingle was noisy underfoot.

On a plank, already loaded with shot to sink it into the unknown, and covered with a sheet, lay the body of Sir Bussy. For a moment the Lord Paramount stood beside it with his arms folded. The Dictatorship had lost its last internal enemy. Everyone had come to a halt now, and everything was silent except for the slow pulsing of the sea.

And in this fashion it was, thought the Lord Paramount, that their six years of association had to end. It had been impossible to incorporate this restless, acquisitive, innovating creature with the great processes of history; he had been incurably undisciplined and disintegrating, and at last it had become a plain struggle for existence between him and his kind, and the established institutions of our race. So long as he had lived he had seemed formidable, but now that his power was wrested from

A NECESSARY EXECUTION

him, there was something pathetic and pitiful in his flimsy proportions. He was a little chap, a poor little fellow. And he had had his hospitably friendly, appealing side.

Why had he not listened to Mr. Parham? Why had he not sought his proper place in the scheme of things and learned to cooperate and obey? Why had he pitted himself against history and perished as all who pit themselves against tradition must perish? The Lord Paramount stood by the little spherical protrusion of the sheet that veiled Sir Bussy's head; Gerson stood at the feet. The Lord Paramount's thoughts went from the dead to the living.

Had he really killed Sir Bussy, or had Gerson killed him?

What are the real and essential antagonisms of human life? Spite of all the ruthless tumult of events that had crowded upon the Lord Paramount, he had continued thinking. At the outset of his dictatorship, he had thought the main conflict in human affairs was the struggle of historical forms to maintain themselves against the scepticism, the disregard, and the incoherent enterprise of modern life. But was that indeed so? Had Sir Bussy been his real adversary? Or had his real adversary been the wider, more systematic intellectual alienations of Camelford? It was Camelford had liberated Sir Bussy, had snatched him out of the influence of Mr. Parham. It was Camelford who had given the fundamental mysteries of Sir Bussy's disposition a form of expression. Just

as the Lord Paramount himself, out of the fears, prejudices, resistances, habits, loyalties, and conservative vigour of mankind, had been able to evoke the heroic insensitiveness of Gerson. If so, it was Sir Bussy and Gerson who were the vital forces of this affair, the actual powers, and he and Camelford were mere intellectualizers to this restlessness on the one hand and this obstinacy on the other. But why, if Sir Bussy embodied a fundamental human force, had it been so easy to kill him? It was absurd even to dream of killing a fundamental force. Had he indeed been killed so easily? A wedge of doubt invaded the mind of the Lord Paramount and spread out to colour all his thoughts.

“Uncover the face,” he said.

He motioned to the chauffeur to turn his lamps on to the white and shrunken visage.

Amazing yet inevitable came the confirmation of his doubts.

“Yes,” he said. “It is like him, but it is not him. Of course, Gerson, you will *always* kill the wrong man. It is well I came to see with my own eyes.”

But Gerson was shameless.

“And now we’ve seen it’s the wrong one,” said Gerson, “it’s time we set about the right one—if the Empire is to get its Gas L in time to win this war.”

“I wonder who this is.”

“Any old chap who got in the way. Such things have to happen in war time.”

A NECESSARY EXECUTION

The Lord Paramount's reserves showed signs of breaking down. "But shall we ever get this stuff? Shall we ever overtake Cameiford and Sir Bussy?"

"We got to," said Gerson in a wrathful shout.