

CHAPTER VII

THE ADVERSARY SPEAKS

MR. PARHAM was astounded by his own fatalism. He who had conceived he held the mastery of the world in his shapely hand was now an almost apathetic spectator of his own frustration. He saw Gerson battering at the trap with a feeling—it was almost akin to gratified malice.

Gerson, he realized, had always been the disagreeable aspect of his mastery; always Gerson had spoilt things; always he had touched the stages of the fine romance of this adventure with an unanticipated cruelty and horror. Mr. Parham was traditional and ready to be traditional, but Gerson he saw now was ancestral and archaic. Mr. Parham realized now as he watched those simian fists hammering with furious gestures on the thick metal and pausing for the answering blows of the men outside, that he had come at last to detest Gerson almost as much as he detested Sir Bussy. He knew that this violence was futile, and he despised it as much as he hated it.

He put out his arm and touched Gerson.

Gerson sprang round, manifestly in a state of intense irritation and his mask did not completely stifle his interrogative snarl.

“That door may have fallen automatically,”

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said Mr. Parham. "For all we know yet—everyone here may be dead."

Gerson thought and then nodded and made a gesture for Mr. Parham to precede him.

"And indeed," said Mr. Parham to himself, "for all I know they may be dead."

In another moment he knew better. The little passage opened out into what seemed to be a large circular space and at the further side of this they saw two figures, unmasked and regarding them. Gas L was as if it had never been. They were men clad in the white overalls dear to chemists and surgeons. They made signs as if for Mr. Parham and Gerson to move softly. They pointed to something hidden as yet from the newcomers. Their forms were a little distorted and their gestures a little exaggerated by some intervening transparent substance.

So they had had an anti-gas for Gas L.

Mr. Parham advanced, and Gerson came close behind.

They emerged upon a circular gallery.

The place made Mr. Parham think of the inside of the reservoir of a coal-gas works. Such a place would surely look like this place if it had electric lights inside it. It was large—it might have been a hundred yards in diameter—and shaped like a drum. The little gallery on which they stood ran round it, and in the central pit and occupying most of it was a huge glass bulb, a vast retort, in which a greenish-white liquid was boiling and bubbling. The shining curvature of the glass rose

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before them, reflecting them faintly with a certain distortion. It shortened and broadened them. It robbed Mr. Parham of all his natural dignity and made Gerson look incredibly squat and filthy and evil. The liquid in the retort was not seething equally; it was traversed and torn here and there by spurts and eddies of commotion; here it was mysteriously still and smooth, here with a wild rush came a drive of bursting bubbles. They stormed across the surface and raised eruptive mounds of ebullient liquid. And over the whole whirled and danced wisps of filmy vapour. But this held Mr. Parham's attention only for a moment. He realized that he was in the presence of Camelford and Sir Bussy, and he forgot everything else in that confrontation.

Both these men were dressed in the same white overalls as the assistants across on the other side of the rotunda. But they had the air of having expected Mr. Parham and his companion. They seemed to have been coming to meet them.

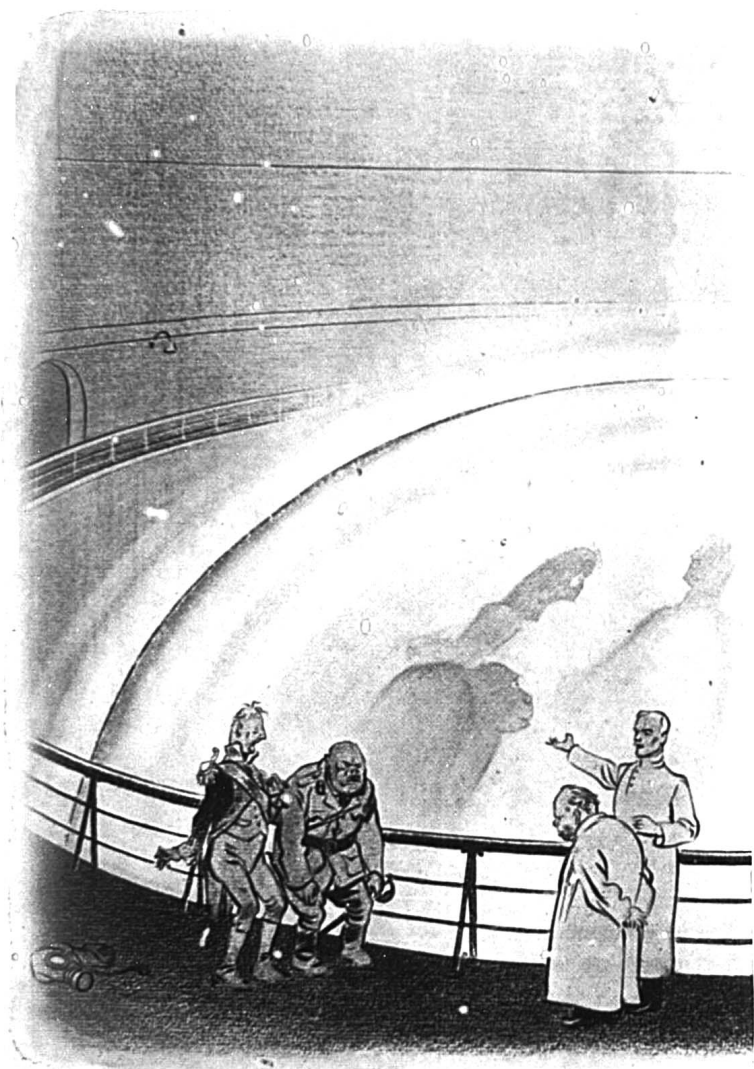
With a gesture of irritation Mr. Parham wrenched off his mask and Gerson followed suit.

"The Lord Paramount of Britain," said Camelford and bowed with manifest irony.

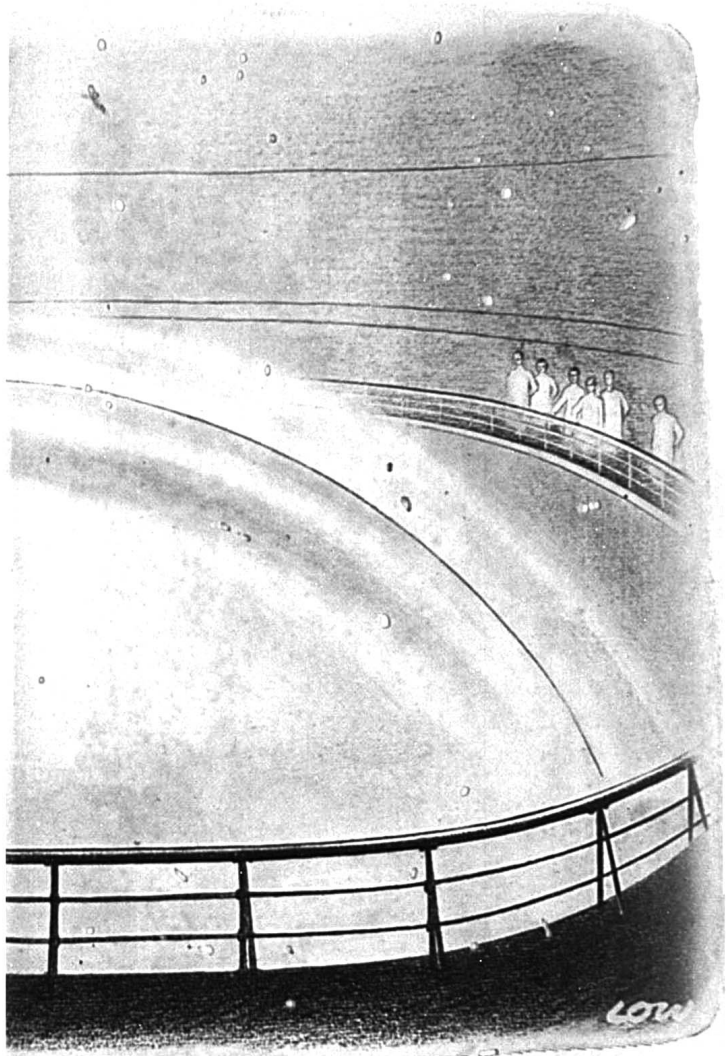
"Looks uncommonly like my old friend Parham," said Sir Bussy.

"This other gentleman, if I'm not mistaken," said Camelford, "is that master strategist, General Gerson."

"It's a loyal Englishman, Mr. Camelford,"



“They had the air of having expected



Mr. Parham and his companion.

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said the General, "who has done his best to save a great Empire."

"You lost a good lot of it to begin with," said Camelford.

"Because we were shot at from behind."

"How's your war going now?"

"The war's gone to pieces. Mutiny. Disorder. London is in revolt and crying for peace. American peace propaganda has done us in—with treason at the back of us. It's the story of the poor old Kaiser over again. Beaten on the home front. No fair soldiering. If we could have made enough of Gas L—if we could have got all we had reasonably thought we should get . . . God! There was nothing wrong in my plans. Except that you've made a corner in Gas L. While we fought the enemy, you, you dirty sneaks, cornered our munitions. And now you've got us, and may Hell take you for it!"

Camelford turned to Sir Bussy. "He speaks with heat, but I think we may admit his facts are sound. You've always had the buying-up instinct." He smiled blandly at Gerson. "We've got the stuff, as you say. We don't pretend we haven't. Sir Bussy has been amazing. But it isn't for sale. We thought it a pity to waste it on Gas L, and so we are making use of it in another way. Our way."

A faint memory of the Lord Paramount reappeared in Mr. Parham. He made the old familiar gesture with his hand. "I want that material," he said. "I demand it."

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Sir Bussy's nether lip dropped. "What for?" he asked.

"To save the Empire. To save the world from chaos."

There ain't going to be no chaos," misquoted Sir Bussy.

"What are you going to do? Where do you think you are driving? Are you going to sit here and barter your stolen goods to the highest bidder?"

"Cornered, perhaps, but not stolen," Sir Bussy corrected.

"Well?"

"We're going to take control," said Sir Bussy.

"*You!* A handful of financial and technical scoundrels!"

"*We're* not going to take control," said Camel-ford, "if Sir Bussy will forgive me. Something else *has* taken control. And there are more men coming into this business of creation than you or Gerson dream."

Mr. Parham looked about him, at the smooth circular walls about them, at the monstrous glass retort, at the distant figures of the silent attendants in white. Their number had now increased to six, and they all stood watching noiselessly. It was extraordinarily still and large and clean and—queer. It was not like war. It was not like government. It was not like industrialism. It was profoundly unhistorical. It was the new thing coming. And at his side stood Gerson. He, on the contrary, was like all the heroes of all the faint hopes

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that have never succeeded. That never very attractive little figure in its uniform of soiled khaki suffered enormously by the contrast, looked brutish, looked earthy. Crawling through the darkness over rough ground usually given over to rabbits and an occasional goat had not improved his never very meticulous appearance, and his native physical vigour, the natural strength of his dark hair, made it very evident that he had had no time for a shave for a couple of days.

Mr. Parham, who had always had a reasonable care for his own costume, experienced a wave of profound disloyalty to his sturdy colleague. This latter looked a pig of a creature, he looked as toughly combative with anything and everything as a netted boar. He was more than half an animal. Yet surely for all his savagery he had the inflexible loyalty of a great hero, he had a heart of ruthless, inexorable gold. Surely?

Mr. Parham's thoughts came back to the last sentence Camelford had uttered and to this strange place into which he and Gerson had blundered. "Something else had taken control?" Not Gerson but something else? What was the issue that had brought them to this confrontation? Gerson hot and dirty, versus this Something Else? Which was not this group nor that group. Not the nation nor the Empire. Not America nor Europe. Which was a sort of emanation from the released and freely acting intelligence of mankind.

A trace of the Master Spirit was still in Mr. Parham's manner, but behind the mask of his reso-

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lute bearing he felt his mind had fallen open and lay unprotected against new strange heretical assailants.

“What is your aim here?” he asked. “What do you imagine you are doing? My ideas are still the common ideas of humanity. They are the forces of history. They are the driving power that has brought civilization to its present pass. Tradition. Discipline. Obedience. What are your ideas? Why have you raised this land out of the sea and made this place?”

“We never raised this land out of the sea,” said Camelford. “We never made this place. And we learn our aim as we get to it.”

“Then who the devil——?” said Gerson.

“This place came. No single man planned it. No single man foresaw it. It appeared. As all the great inventions have appeared. Not out of individuals but out of the mind of man. This land with its hidden stores of strange minerals lay under the sea, ready for anyone who fulfilled the conditions fixed for raising it. And these works and the gas we are making, those also depended on the fulfilling of conditions. We individual men of science and men of enterprise do no more than observe the one supreme condition—which is that the human intelligence should have fair play. Now that these things have realized themselves, we look for the next thing we have to do.”

“Ugh,” said Gerson.

“The old face of human life is passing away. In that obedient fashion to which our science has

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trained us we observe the coming of the new. The age of war and conquest is over. War is done with, but with war a thousand other once vital things are done with also. The years of restraint are at an end. The patriots and warriors and mariners, the flags and the nations, have to be rounded up now and put away forever. Powers and empires are over. The loyalties that served them must die. They matter no more. They become a monstrous danger. What was it Sir Bussy said? 'The ideas of an old buck rabbit in the reign of Queen Elizabeth.' Shut the book of national conflicts and conquests now and hand it over to the psychologists. We are the workers of a new dawn. Men of no nation. Men without traditions. Men who look forward and not back. Men who have realized the will and the intelligence that we obey and possess in common. Our race has to organize the whole world now, a field for this creative energy that flows through and uses and guides us."

"But you are brewing a gas here!" said Mr. Parham. "It is a gas—a dangerous gas. What is it?"

"It takes some brewing. If a crack in that retort let in the air—well, somewhere else this thing would have to begin over again. Here it would be finished. This stuff, you see here is only a stage in a long string of processes. Before our product is ready to use there have to be corrosive and destructive phases. It is unavoidable that there should be these phases of corrosion and de-

struction. What is adventure if it has no danger? But when we have done, the gas we shall have here will not be a poison gas at all. Instead we shall have a vapour to enter into blood and nerve and brain and clean the mind of man as it has never been cleaned before. It will allow his brain, so clogged and stifled still by old rubbish, so poisoned and cramped and crippled, to free itself from all that holds it back now from apprehending and willing to the utmost limits of its possibility. And that points to a new world quite different from the world to which your mind is adapted. A world beyond your dreaming. You don't begin to imagine yet a tithe of the things a liberated human brain can do. All your poor old values will be mislaid and forgotten. Your kingdoms and empires, your morals and rights, all you find so lovely and splendid, the heroism and sacrifices of battlefields, your dreams of lordship, every romantic thing, the devotion of servants, the subjugation of women, and the deception of children—all the complex rigmaroles of your old world will be washed out of men's thought. We are brewing a new morality here and a new temerity. Instead of distrusting each other, killing each other, competing with and enslaving and consuming one another, we go on to a world of equals, working together under the guidance or realized fact, for ends too high for your imagination. . . .”

“But this is the voice of Satan himself,” interrupted Mr. Parham. “This is the Sin of Pride

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derying Heaven. This is Babel come again."

"No," said Camelford, and it seemed to Mr. Parham that he began to grow larger and tower over his hearers. "It is the way of escape from our narrow selves. Forward to the new. Cling to this traditionalism of yours a little longer; cling still to what *you* call history, with all these new powers and possibilities we are pressing into your hands—and there can be only one end—Catastrophe."

The word Catastrophe reverberated in Mr. Parham's mind. Then his attention was caught and riveted on Gerson's attitude. The General's one serviceable eye, dilated and intent, was fixed on Camelford, his lips were pressed together, his bulldog face was set in an expression of stern indignation. A deep Indian red had invaded his complexion. He was rigid except that his right arm was moving very slowly. His hand gripped the butt of his revolver and was tightening on it and drawing it out.

A strange conflict prevailed in Mr. Parham's mind. He found this talk of Camelford's antagonistic and hateful, but he did not want to interrupt it; he wanted to hear the man out; above all, he did not want to have the talk interrupted by Gerson in Gerson's fashion.

And besides, what was Gerson doing here? He had not been asked to this party. But was it a party? This was not a dinner party. It was a séance. But no! What was it? Where were we? Cayme?

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Within the now frightfully confused soul of Mr. Parham intellectuality grappled with reaction. Not yet, at any rate, must things come to this. He made a weak movement of his hand as if in restraint of Gerson's intention.

Instantly Gerson had whipped out his weapon. "Stand off," he said in an aside to Parham, and then to Camelford, "Hands up!"

Camelford did not seem to realize his danger. "Put that old thing up," he said. "Give it to me. You'll break something."

He came, hand out, towards Gerson.

"Keep back!" said Gerson. "I'll show you if this sort of thing is over. It's only beginning. I'm the real Lord Paramount. Force and straight shooting. Do you think I care a damn for your gas or you? Catastrophe! A fig for your old catastrophe! Which is always coming and never comes. . . . Hands up, I tell you. Put up your hands, you damned fool! *Stop!*"

He fired. Then very swiftly the blue steel barrel under Mr. Parham's nose sought Sir Bussy.

Vainly. Gerson's shot hit the metal door that closed upon that elusive being. Mr. Parham felt an instant pang of exasperation with both these uncontrollable spirits. He still wanted Camelford to go on. His mind flashed back to Camelford. But Camelford was staggering with his hand on his throat.

Then it was catastrophe, as Camelford had said.

A crash and a splintering of glass. Camelford had fallen through the great glass retort, carrying

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down a transparent shattering triangle, had splashed into the liquid and now lay far below, moving convulsively on the curve of the nether glass. For a moment the air about them was full of ascendant streamers of vapour made visible as they changed to green and mingled with the air. They eddied and whirled. They spun faster and faster.

Gerson had turned his weapon upon Parham. "You too! *You* to talk of war! With the wits of a prig and the guts of a parasite! Get out of my world!"

The vituperating mouth hung open arrested. No shot came.

But now everything was moving very swiftly. One last flash of frantic perception closed the story. The rotunda yawned open as though some mighty hand had wrenched it in two, and through the separating halves of the roof appeared the warm glow of sunrise. A universe of sound pressed upon and burst the drums of Mr. Parham's ears. An immense explosion which seemed to have been going on for some moments caught him and lifted him backward and upward at an incredible speed, and Gerson, suddenly flat and bloody, dashed by, seemed to be drawn out longer and longer until he was only a thread of scarlet and khaki, and so vanished slanting up the sky, with his revolver spinning preposterously after him. . . .