

## CHAPTER IX

### THE LAST STRAW

"I'M going to walk up to Claridge's," said Sir Bussy. "This affair has left me stuffy. You go that way?"

"As far as Pontingale Street, yes."

"Come on to Claridge's. My nieces are having a great dance there. . . . That ectoplasm fairly turned me sick. . . . I've done with this spook business for good and all."

"I always wanted to keep out of it," said Mr. Parham.

The two men set out side by side, and for a time each pursued his own thoughts. Sir Bussy's led him apparently to some conclusion, for suddenly he said, "Gaw"—as if he tapped a nail on the head.

"Parham, were you awake all through that séance?"

"No. I was bored. I fell asleep."

"I fell asleep." Sir Bussy reflected. "These séances make you sleep—and dream. That's the trick of them."

Mr. Parham looked at his companion, startled. Had he too dreamt? And what had he dreamt?

"I dreamt about the things those fellows,

## THE LAST STRAW

Camelford and Hamp, were saying the other night."

"Curious!" said Mr. Parham, but he felt the thing was much more curious than his voice betrayed. What if they had had the same dream?

"I seemed to see their arguments in a sort of realized kind of way."

How poor the man's powers of expression!

"You and I were on opposite sides," he added, "Daggers drawn."

"I hope not."

"There was a war. Gaw! I can't tell you. Such a war! It was like trying to plug a burst steam pipe." Sir Bussy left his hearer to imagine what that meant. And Mr. Parham was able to imagine.

"I cornered the chemicals," said Sir Bussy. "I and Camelford. We kind of held it up. We did our best. But at last the natural lunacy in things got loose and—everything seemed to blow to pieces. There was a nasty little toad of a sojer. *Bang!*"

"That was the waking up?"

"That was the waking up."

Then Sir Bussy went off at a tangent. "We rich men—I mean we big business people—we've been backing the wrong horse. We've been afraid of Doggy Bolshevik and all the new things, and damn it! it's the *old* things that mean to bust up affairs. We're new things ourselves. What did J. C. say? No good putting new wine in old bottles. . . . The world's rising and splashing over. The old notices and boundaries won't

## THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

hold it. . . . I wish I could describe my dream to you. Extraordinary it was. And you were in it somehow all through. . . . And Camelford. . . . Hamp was American ambassador. Crazy, it was. . . .”

Now this was getting more and more remarkable. But no—it was not the same dream—similar, perhaps. It was impossible that it could have been the same. . . .

A dream, as everyone knows, can happen with incredible rapidity. It may all have happened in a second. The sounds of Sir Titus Knowles turning on lights and bumping about with the medium and snarling at him had no doubt provided the gunfire and flashes and evoked war-like images in both their awakening minds. And the rest had arisen from what lay ready in their antagonistic attitudes.

Sir Bussy went on with conviction: “If we don’t see to it, these Old Institutions of yours and all that—these old things that ought to be cleaned up and put away now—will upset the whole human apple cart—like some crazy old granny murdering a child. Foreign offices, war offices, sovereignty, and clutter like that. Bloody clutter. Bloodstained clutter. All that I got as clear as day. They can’t hold things any longer. They’ve got to be superannuated, shoved away in the attic. I didn’t realize. We’ve got to do something about it soon. Damn soon. Before another smash. We new people. We’ve just floated about getting rich and doing nothing about it. . . . Buying and

## THE LAST STRAW

selling and amalgamating and monopolizing isn't enough. The worst thing in life is to have power and not use it to the full. . . . There wasn't a thing in my nightmare that might not happen."

Mr. Parham waited for what might come next. It was extraordinary, this parallelism, but still, his reason insisted they could not have had the same identical dream.

"Was there," he said, "by any chance, a sort of Lord—Lord Protector in your dream?"

"No," said Sir Bussy. "There was just a damned pig-headed patriotic imperial government and a war. Come to think of it, there was something—a sort of dictatorship. They put Labour out of business. I thought the chap was Amery. A sort of lofty Amery. Amery drawn out elegant—if you understand me. He didn't amount to much. What mattered was the ideas behind him."

"And where did I come in?"

There was a catch in Mr. Parham's breath.

"You were on the side of the government and we argued. You were for the war. In this dream I seemed always to be meeting you and arguing. It made it very real. You were some sort of official. We kept on arguing. Even when the bombs were bursting and they tried to shoot me."

Mr. Parham was to a certain extent relieved. Not completely but sufficiently. There had been a dream, evidently, a similar dream; a clearly similar dream. It is a distinctive feature of the séance condition that people should have similar

## THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

dreams; but his dream and Sir Bussy's had not been the same dream. Not exactly the same dream. They had visualized the expectation of a possible war that haunted both their minds, but each in his own fashion—each with his own distinctive personal reference. That was it. The brief and tragic (and possibly slightly absurd) reign of Mr. Parham as Lord Paramount could be locked forever in his own breast.

But what was Sir Bussy saying?

He had been telling something of his dream that Mr. Parham had missed.

“We've got to give people a juster idea of what is going on and give it 'em quick. Or they'll fall into unutterable smash-up. Schoc's—you can't. You can't get the necessary *quality* in teachers. Universities lock themselves against us. Yes, they do. We've got to snatch the new generation out of the hands of doddering prigs and pedants and tell 'em, tell 'em, tell 'em. Catch the oversplash of life. In new ideas, in new organizations. The way out is through books, newspapers, print, talk. . . . ‘Light, more light,’ as old Gutty said.” (Did he mean Goethe?)

“I'm coming into the newspaper world, Parham, I tell you. You've often suggested it, and here I am doing as you said. You know a thing or two. This sort of war drift can only be stopped by a big push the other way. Bigger than anything done so far. Crowds of people in earnest. The Big Push for the new world! What of a big Sunday paper—that's the way they read—to give

## THE LAST STRAW

em science, give them the drift and meaning of the new world that—was it Camelford said it?—the new world that's trying to get born. . . . Or was it that chap from Geneva?' . . . Warn them how Granny still mutters and messes about with the knives. . . . A great big powerful paper."

At these words a queer irrational excitement made Mr. Parham tingle from head to foot. His sense of antagonism to Sir Bussy faded and vanished. Hopes long cherished and long suppressed arose in him with such a strength and violence that his orientation was lost. He could see this only as one thing, a proposal to himself. The proposal was coming in a manner he had never thought of, it was coming with a strangely twisted look, but surely it was coming. He was going to have his paper. At last. He might have to take rather a different line from the one he would have preferred before his dream, but his dream had twisted and turned him about a lot, and his awakening still more. And anyhow—it was a paper!

"Isn't a Saturday week'ly perhaps a better medium?" he asked in a strained, ill-controlled voice. "Smaller circulation, perhaps, but more real influence."

"No, I want this paper to go out to the main public by the hundred thousand. I want to go behind all those clever fellows. They cut no ice. I want to go out with pictures and vulgar noise and all that, and tell 'em and tell 'em and tell 'em, week after week, that these old things of yours

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

are played out and dangerous and—oh, damnable!”

“*These old things of yours?*” Something chill blew upon Mr. Parham. But still the poor desperate soul hung on. For six expectant years he had desired this thing.

“I don’t quite see myself doing that,” he said. “I’m not a Garvin, you know. I doubt if one can be both copious and fine.”

Sir Bussy stopped short and regarded his companion with amazement, his mouth askew, for a couple of seconds or more. “Gaw!” he said at last. “I wasn’t thinking of *you*.”

Mr. Parham was now very pale. The incredible was happening. His mind refused to accept it. “But the paper!” he gasped.

“I’ll have to do it with the right sort of fellows,” said Sir Bussy, speaking slowly. “It would be up against every damn thing you are.”

He was staring at Mr. Parham in manifest amazement. As though he realized something for the first time. Six years they had been together, and never had it entered his head that the ideal editor of anything was Mr. Parham. And ne meant, he really meant, this illiterate Cockney! to conduct his paper himself. Out of a dream he had got this crazy confidence. Some fantastic dream in the heavy and charged atmosphere of that séance. That internal séance! That ten thousand times accursed séance! It had put everything awry. It had shattered everything. It had been a vat of mental fermentation. Out of

## THE LAST STRAW

its tedious tensions these hypnotic revelations had arisen. It had dispersed the decent superficial controls of both their minds and laid bare things that should never have been laid bare. It had revealed the roots of their imagination. It had exposed the irreconcilable. How true and sound had been the instincts of Mr. Parham, when he had resisted the resort to these darkened chambers and these irrational expansions of expectation which are the inevitable consequences of séance conditions!

A paper—a great paper, financed by Sir Bussy! And not to be his! A paper *against* him!

Six years wasted! Slights! Humiliations! Irritations! Tailors' bills!

Never in his life had he screamed, but now he was near screaming. He felt with his fingers inside his collar and had no word to say. Something had broken within him. It was the back of that poor weary camel of hope which for six long years had carried him so far and by such winding tracks, uphill and downhill, across great spaces, into strange continents, in pursuit of Sir Bussy.

They stopped short at the corner of Pontingale Street. Mr. Parham glared, speechless, at his companion. Here indeed their ways diverged.

"But come on," said Sir Bussy. "It's hardly midnight yet. Come on and see if my nieces aren't setting Claridge's afire. Everyone will be there—drabs and duchesses—Gaby—everybody."

For the first time in their relationship Mr. Parham declined an invitation. "No," he said



## THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

recovering the power of speech.

Sir Bussy never took a refusal without a struggle. "Oh, *come!*" he said.

Mr. Parham shook his head. His soul was now brimming over with hate for this bilking, vulgar little scoundrel, this treacherous and incurable antagonist. His hate may have looked out of his eyes. They may have revealed the spite of devil within the don. For the first time, perhaps, in this long intercourse Sir Bussy may have seen all that Mr. Parham could feel about him.

For twenty seconds of stark revelation the two men confronted each other, and then Mr. Parham, recovering his discretion, was catching his soul back from its windows and drawing down the blinds. But Sir Bussy did not repeat his invitation to Claridge's.

"Gaw," he said, and turned away towards Berkeley Square. He did not even say "Good-night."

Never before had Mr. Parham heard a "Gaw" so fraught with derision and dismissal. It was an entirely unanswerable "Gaw." It was abandonment.

For a minute, perhaps, he stood quite still as Sir Bussy receded. Then slowly, almost submissively, he turned his face towards his lodging in Pontingale Street.

It seemed to Mr. Parham that all reality had deserted him. Not only had Sir Bussy gone off with all his dearest hopes, but it was as if his own substance had gone from him also. Within, the late Lord Paramount was nothing now but a

## THE LAST STRAW

vacuum, a cavernous nothingness craving for reassurance.

Had he no future? Some day, perhaps, when old Waterham died—if ever that old bit of pemican did die—the Mastership of St. Simon's. That—and a pose of smiling disdain. With a little acid in the smile.

His mind swayed uncertainly and then came round with the quivering decision of a compass needle towards the dusky comfort and intimacy, the limitless understanding and sympathy of little Mrs. Pinchot. She would understand him. She would understand. Even if all that had made history for him went to the dust destructor, even if a new upstart history that took no heed of Princes and Powers, Persons and Policies and was all compact of biology, economics and suchlike innovations, ruled the earth in its stead. He knew she would understand—whatever there was to understand, and see it, whatever it was, in a light that would sustain and help him.

True indeed that the chief proofs of her devotion and understanding had come to him in this dream, but there is an element of revelation in every dream, an element of good in every disaster.

Happily he had her telephone number. . . .

And so, showing a weary back to us, with his evening hat on the back of his head, our deflated publicist recedes up Pontingale Streets, recedes with all his vanities, his stores of erudition, his

#### THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARIAM

dear preposterous generalizations, his personified nations and all his obsolescent paraphernalia of scholarly political wisdom, so feebly foolish in their substance and so hideously disastrous in their possible consequences, and his author, who has come to feel a curious unreasonable affection for him, must needs bid him a reluctant farewell.

THE END