

CHAPTER IV

NOCTURNE

MR. PARHAM woke up with a start. He remembered now quite clearly that he had put down his Gibus hat on the table in the supper room. Some officious attendant had no doubt whisked it aside. He must write to the Savoy people about it in the morning.

“Sir” or “Dear Sirs” or “Mr. Parham presents his compliments.” Not too austere. Not too familiar. . . . Ta ra ra ra—ink a-poo poo.

If he had left his Gibus he seemed to have brought home the greater part of the jazz band. He had got it now in his head, and there, with all the irrepressible vigour of the Negro musician, it was still energetically at work. It had a large circular brassy headache for a band stand. Since it rendered sleep impossible and reading for some reason undesirable, Mr. Parham thought it best to lie still in the dark—or rather the faint dawn—abandoning himself to the train of thought it trailed after it.

It had been a *silly* evening.

Oh! a silly evening!

Mr. Parham found himself filled with a sense of missed opportunities, of distractions foolishly pursued, of a lack of continuity and self-control.

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That girl Gaby Greuze—she had been laughing at him. Anyhow, she might have been laughing at him. *Had* she been laughing at him?

The endocranial orchestra had evoked the figure of Sir Bussy, alone and unprotected, standing, waving his head to its subtropical exuberances. Moody he had seemed, mentally vacant for the moment. It would of course have been perfectly easy to catch him in that phase, caught him and got hold of him. Mr. Parham could have gone up to him and said something pregnant to him, quietly but clearly.

“*Vanitas vanitatum*,” he could have said, for example, and, since one never knows where one may not strike upon virgin ignorance in these new men, a translation might have been added tactfully and at once: “Vanity of vanities.”

And why? Because he had no past. Because he had lost touch with the past. A man who has no past has no future. And so on to the forward-looking attitude—and the influential weekly.

But instead of telling this to Sir Bussy himself, straight and plain, Mr. Parham had just wandered about telling it to Gaby Greuze, to Lady Glassglade, to casual strangers, any old people. “I am not used to action,” groaned Mr. Parham to his God. “I am not direct. And opportunity passes me by.”

For a time he lay and wondered if it would not be good for all scholars and men of thought to be *obliged* to take decisive action of some sort at least once a day. Then their wills would be-

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

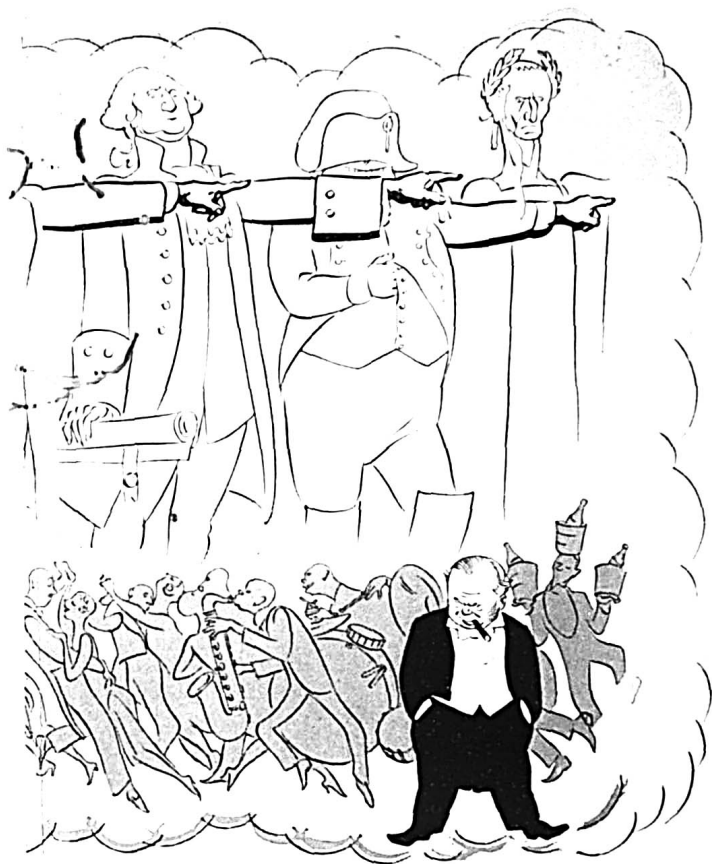
come nervous and muscular. But then——? Would they lose critical acuteness? Would they become crude?

After a time he was back arguing in imagination with Sir Bussy.

“You think this life is pleasure,” he would say. “It is not. It is nothing. It is less than nothing. It is efflorescence.”

“Efflorescence.” A good word. This was an Age of Efflorescence. If a parallel was wanted one must read Petronius. When Rome was still devouring the world. That too was an Age of Efflorescence. Everywhere a hastening from one meretricious pleasure to another. Old fashions abandoned for the mere love of novelty. These ridiculous little black evening hats, for instance, instead of the stately Gibus. (Come to think of it, it was hardly worth while to recover that Gibus. He would have to get one of these evening slouches.) No precedence. No restriction. Duchesses, countesses, diplomatists, fashionable physicians, rubbing shoulders with pretty chorus girls, inky adventuresses, artists, tradesmen, actors, movie stars, coloured singers, Casanovas and Cagliostros—*pleased* to mingle with them—no order, no sense of function. One had to say to fellows like Sir Bussy. “Through some strange dance of accident power has come to you. But beware of power that does not carry on and develop tradition. Think of the grave high figures of the past: Cæsar, Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth, Richelieu (you should read my





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little book), Napoleon, Washington, Garibaldi, Lincoln, William Ewart Gladstone, kings, priests and prophets, statesmen and thinkers, builders of Powers; the increasing purpose, the onward march! Think of great armoured angels and beautiful intent symbolic faces! Our Imperial Destinies! The Destiny of France! Our Glorious Navy! Embattled flags! Here now is the sword of power in your hands! Is it to do nothing more than cut innumerable sandwiches for supper?"

Again Mr. Parham spoke aloud in the night. "Nay!" he said.

He was suddenly reminded of the champagne.

Efflorescence was really a very good word. No, *not* effervescence, efflorescence. If only one had a weekly, what a scathing series of articles reviewing modern tendencies might there not be under that general title! People would ask, "Have you seen 'Efflorescence' again in the *Paramount Weekly*? Pitiless!"

It was a bother that the band inside his headache did not know when to leave off. It went so and it went so. . . . What a lot of champagne there had been! Efflorescence and effervescence.

He saw himself giving a little book to Sir Bussy almost sacramentally. "Here," he would say, "is a book to set you thinking. I know it is too much to ask you to read it through, short though it is, but at least read the title, *The Undying Past*. Does that convey nothing to you?"

He saw himself standing gravely while Sir Bussy tried uneasily to get past him.

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

After all efflorescence, as the chemists had taught us to use the word nowadays, implies a considerable amount of original stuff still undecayed. Beneath this glittering froth, this levity, this champagne drinking and jazz dancing, this careless mixing of incompatible social elements, far beneath was the old enduring matter of human life, the toil, the sustained purpose, the precedences, the loyalties, the controls. On the surface the artist of life might seem to be a slightly negroid Fragonard, but below stern spirits were planning the outline of stupendous destinies. Governments and foreign offices were still at their immemorial work; the soldiers gathered in their barracks and the great battleships ploughed remorselessly the vainly slapping waves. Religious teachers inculcated loyalty and obedience; the business men ordered their argosies across the oceans, and the social conflicts muttered about the factories. There was likely to be grave economic trouble this winter. "The grim spectre of want." Sir Bussy indeed lived in a dream world of uninterrupted indulgence. But all dreams come to an end.

The spirit of Carlyle, the spirit of the Hebrew prophets entered into Mr. Parham. It was like some obscure stern sect coming to a meeting in a back street chapel. One by one they came. High above the severe lines of that little back street façade, the red planet Mars ruled his sky. The band in his headache played wilder, more threatening airs.

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“Verily,” he whispered and, “Repent. . . . Yesss.”

The real stern things of life gathered unobtrusively but surely, prepared when the time came to blow their clarions, prepared to rouse this trivial world again to fresh effort and grim resolve, to unbend the fluttering flag, to exalt and test the souls of men, to ennoble them by sacrifice and suffering.

The wailing multitude would call for guidance. What could men like Sir Bussy give it?

“And yet I would have stood by your side,” Mr. Parham would say. “I would have stood by your side.”

For a time Mr. Parham’s mind seemed to be full of marching troops, host by host, corps by corps, regiment after regiment, company upon company. They marched to the rhythm of the Negro band, and as they marched they receded. Down a long vista they receded and the music receded.

The face of Mr. Parham became firm and hard and calm in the darkness. Stern resolve brooded over the troubled frothing of his thoughts and subdued them. The champagne made one last faint protest.

Presently his lips relaxed. His mouth fell a little open. . . .

A deep, regular, increasing sawing of his breath told the mouse behind the skirting that Mr. Parham was asleep.