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CHAPTER I

Tallis

It was the day of Gandhi's assassination; but on Calvary the sightseers were more interested in the contents of their picnic baskets than in the possible significance of the, after all, rather commonplace event they had turned out to witness. In spite of all the astronomers can say, Ptolemy was perfectly right: the centre of the universe is here, not there. Gandhi might be dead; but across the desk in his office, across the lunch table in the Studio Commissary, Bob Briggs was concerned to talk only about himself.

'You've always been such a help,' Bob assured me, as he made ready, not without relish, to tell the latest instalment of his history.

But at bottom, as I knew very well and as Bob himself knew even better than I, he didn't really want to be helped. He liked being in a mess and, still more, he liked talking about his predicament. The mess and its verbal dramatization made it possible for him to see himself as all the Romantic Poets rolled into one—Beddoes committing suicide, Byron committing fornication, Keats dying of Fanny Brawne, Harriet dying of Shelley. And

seeing himself as all the Romantic Poets, he could forget for a little the two prime sources of his misery—the fact that he had none of their talents and very little of their sexual potency.

‘We got to the point,’ he said (so tragically that it occurred to me that he would have done better as an actor than as a writer of screen plays), ‘we got to the point, Elaine and I, where we felt like . . . like Martin Luther.’

‘Martin Luther?’ I repeated in some astonishment.

‘You know—*ich kann nicht anders*. We just couldn’t—but *couldn’t*—do anything but go off together to Acapulco.’

And Gandhi, I reflected, just couldn’t do anything but resist oppression non-violently and go to prison and finally get shot.

‘So there it was,’ he went on. ‘We got on a plane and flew to Acapulco.’

‘Finally!’

‘What do you mean, “*finally*”?’

‘Well, you’d been thinking about it for a long time, hadn’t you?’

Bob looked annoyed. But I remembered all the previous occasions when he had talked to me about the problem. Should he or should he not make Elaine his mistress? (That was his wonderfully old-world way of putting it.) Should he or should he not ask Miriam for a divorce?

A divorce from the woman who in a very real sense was still what she had always been—his only love; but in another very real sense Elaine was also his only love—and would be still more so if he finally decided (and that was

why he couldn’t decide) to ‘make her his mistress.’ To be or not to be—the soliloquy had gone on for the best part of two years, and if Bob could have had his way, it would have gone on for ten years longer. He liked his messes to be chronic and mainly verbal, never so acutely carnal as to put his uncertain virility to yet another humiliating test. But under the influence of his eloquence, of that baroque façade of a profile and prematurely snowy hair, Elaine had evidently grown tired of a merely chronic and platonic mess. Bob was presented with an ultimatum; it was to be either Acapulco or a clean breach.

So there he was, bound and committed to adultery no less irrevocably than Gandhi had been bound and committed to non-violence and prison and assassination, but, one may suspect, with more and deeper misgivings. Misgivings which the event had wholly justified. For though poor Bob didn’t actually tell me what had happened at Acapulco, the fact that Elaine was now, as he put it, ‘acting strangely’ and had been seen several times in the company of that unspeakable Moldavian baron, whose name I have fortunately forgotten, seemed to tell the whole ludicrous and pathetic story. And meanwhile Miriam had not only refused to give him a divorce: she had taken the opportunity of Bob’s absence and her possession of his power of attorney to have the title to the ranch, the two cars, the four apartment houses, the corner lots at Palm Springs and all the securities transferred from his name to hers. And meanwhile he owed thirty-three thousand dollars to the Government for arrears of income tax. But when he asked his producer for that extra two hundred and fifty dollars a week which

had been as good as promised him, there was only a long and pregnant silence.

‘What about it, Lou?’

Measuring his words with a solemn emphasis, Lou Lublin gave his answer.

‘Bob,’ he said, ‘in this Studio, at this time, not even Jesus Christ himself could get a raise.’

The tone was friendly; but when Bob tried to insist, Lou had banged his desk and told him that he was being un-American. That finished it.

Bob talked on. But what a subject, I was thinking, for a great religious painting! Christ before Lublin, begging for a raise of only two hundred and fifty bucks a week and being turned down flat. It would be one of Rembrandt’s favourite themes, drawn, etched, painted a score of times. Jesus turning sadly away into the darkness of unpaid income tax, while in the golden spotlight, glittering with gems and metallic highlights, Lou in an enormous turban still chuckled triumphantly over what he had done to the Man of Sorrows.

And then there would be Breughel’s version of the subject. A great synoptic view of the entire Studio; a three-million-dollar musical in full production, with every technical detail faithfully reproduced; two or three thousand figures, all perfectly characterized; and in the bottom right-hand corner long search would finally reveal a Lublin, no bigger than a grasshopper, heaping contumely upon an even tinier Jesus.

‘But I’ve had an absolutely stunning idea for an original,’ Bob was saying with that optimistic enthusiasm which is the desperate man’s alternative to suicide.

‘My agent’s absolutely crazy about it—thinks I ought to be able to sell it for fifty or sixty thousand.’

He started to tell the story.

Still thinking of Christ before Lublin, I visualized the scene as Piero would have painted it—the composition, luminously explicit, an equation in balanced voids and solids, in harmonizing and contrasting hues; the figures in adamantine repose. Lou and his assistant producers would all be wearing those Pharaonic head-dresses, those huge inverted cones of white or coloured felt, which in Piero’s world serve the double purpose of emphasizing the solid-geometrical nature of the human body and the outlandishness of Orientals. For all their silken softness, the folds of every garment would have the inevitability and definitiveness of syllogisms carved in porphyry, and throughout the whole we should feel the all-pervading presence of Plato’s God, for ever mathematizing chaos into the order and beauty of art.

But from the Parthenon and the *Timaean* a specious logic leads to the tyranny which, in the *Republic*, is held up as the ideal form of government. In the field of politics the equivalent of a theorem is a perfectly disciplined army; of a sonnet or picture, a police state under a dictatorship. The Marxist calls himself scientific, and to this claim the Fascist adds another: he is the poet—the scientific poet—of a new mythology. Both are justified in their pretensions; for each applies to human situations the procedures which have proved effective in the laboratory and the ivory tower. They simplify, they abstract, they eliminate all that, for their purposes, is irrelevant and ignore whatever they choose to regard as inessential; they

impose a style, they compel the facts to verify a favourite hypothesis, they consign to the waste-paper basket all that, to their mind, falls short of perfection. And because they thus act like good artists, sound thinkers and tried experimenters, the prisons are full, political heretics are worked to death as slaves, the rights and preferences of mere individuals are ignored, the Gandhis are murdered, and from morning till night a million school teachers and broadcasters proclaim the infallibility of the bosses who happen at the moment to be in power.

'And after all,' Bob was saying, 'there's no reason why a movie shouldn't be a work of art. It's this damned commercialism . . .'

He spoke with all the righteous indignation of an ungifted artist denouncing the scapegoat whom he has chosen to take the blame for the lamentable consequences of his own lack of talent.

'Do you think Gandhi was interested in art?' I asked.

'Gandhi? No, of course not.'

'I think you're right,' I agreed. 'Neither in art nor in science. And that's why we killed him.'

'We?'

'Yes, we. The intelligent, the active, the forward-looking, the believers in Order and Perfection. Whereas Gandhi was a reactionary who believed only in people. Squalid little individuals governing themselves, village by village, and worshipping the Brahman who is also Atman. It was intolerable. No wonder we bumped him off.'

But even as I spoke, I was thinking that that wasn't the whole story. The whole story included an inconsistency, almost a betrayal. This man who believed only in

people had got himself involved in the subhuman mass-madness of nationalism, in the would-be superhuman, but actually diabolic, institutions of the nation-state. He got himself involved in these things, imagining that he could mitigate the madness and convert what was satanic in the state to something like humanity. But nationalism and the politics of power had proved too much for him. It is not at the centre, not from within the organization, that the saint can cure our regimented schizophrenia; it is only from without, at the periphery. If he makes himself a part of the machine, in which the collective madness is incarnated, one or other of two things is bound to happen. Either he remains himself, in which case the machine will use him as long as it can and, when he becomes unusable, reject or destroy him. Or he will be transformed into the likeness of the mechanism with and against which he works, and in this case we shall see Holy Inquisitions and alliances with any tyrant prepared to guarantee ecclesiastical privileges.

'Well, to get back to their disgusting commercialism,' Bob said at last. 'Let me give you an example . . .'

But I was thinking that the dream of Order begets tyranny, the dream of Beauty, monsters and violence. Athena, the patroness of the arts, is also the goddess of scientific warfare, the heavenly Chief of every General Staff. We killed him because, after having briefly (and fatally) played the political game, he refused any longer to go on dreaming our dream of a national Order, a social and economic Beauty; because he tried to bring us back to the concrete and cosmic facts of real people and the inner Light.

The headlines I had seen that morning were parables; the event they recorded, an allegory and a prophecy. In that symbolic act, we who so longed for peace had rejected the only possible means to peace and had issued a warning to all who, in the future, might advocate any courses but those which lead inevitably to war.

'Well, if you've finished your coffee,' said Bob, 'let's go.'

We rose and walked out into the sunshine. Bob took my arm and squeezed it.

'You've been enormously helpful,' he assured me again.

'I wish I could believe it, Bob.'

'But it's true, it's true.'

And perhaps it was true, in the sense that stirring the mess before a sympathetic public made him feel better, more like the Romantics.

We walked on for a little in silence—past the Projection Rooms and between the Churrigueresque bungalows of the executives. Over the entrance to the largest of them a great bronze plaque bore the inscription LOU LUBLIN PRODUCTIONS.

'What about that salary raise?' I asked. 'Shall we go in and have another shot at it?'

Bob uttered a rueful little laugh, and there was another silence. When at last he spoke, it was in a pensive tone.

'Too bad about old Gandhi,' he said. 'I suppose his great secret was not wanting anything for himself.'

'Yes, I suppose that was one of the secrets.'

'I wish to God I didn't want things so much.'

'Same here,' I fervently concurred.

'And when you finally get what you want, it's never what you thought it was going to be.'

Bob sighed and relapsed into silence. He was thinking, no doubt, of Acapulco, of the horrible necessity of passing from the chronic to the acute, from the vaguely verbal to the all too definitely and concretely carnal.

We emerged from the street of executive bungalows, crossed a parking lot and entered a canyon between towering sound stages. A tractor passed, pulling a low trailer, on which was the bottom half of the west door of a thirteenth-century Italian cathedral.

'That's for "Catherine of Siena."'

'What's that?'

'Hedda Boddy's new picture. I worked on the script two years ago. Then they gave it to Streicher. And after that it was rewritten by the O'Toole-Menendez-Boguslavsky team. It's lousy.'

Another trailer rattled past with the upper half of the cathedral door and a pulpit by Niccolò Pisano.

'When you come to think of it,' I said, 'she's very like Gandhi in some ways.'

'Who? Hedda?'

'No, Catherine.'

'Oh, I see. I thought you were talking about the loin-cloth.'

'I was talking about saints in politics,' I said. 'They didn't actually lynch her, of course; but that was only because she died too young. The consequences of her politics hadn't had time to show up. Do you go into all that in the script?'

Bob shook his head.