THE HOLY TERROR!

Story of a World Dictator

By H. C. WELLS

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"Why should I lecture you like this? Remember yourself, man. Remember your humanity. Remember how shabby we were when we met. Remember our long tramp together and how hungry we used to get in the afternoon. Remember that punch—the rabbit and onions—that visit to Jim Fiab's headquarters at Balting—that stinking little major! What has happened to you to forget such things?"

Rud's pallor seemed to increase. He had something very urgent to say and he did not know how to begin. It looked almost as though he was going to be sick. He brought his face closer to Chiffan's. When at last he spoke, he spoke in a close undertone and a new bitterness had come into his voice.

"And I remember your bragging about that Lancashire girl's neck. I remember that too. You talked about having her and how easy she would have been. In the punt you talked. I remember every word of it. I remember you sneering and jeering at me about my having to give up all thought of sex. Afterwards on the road after Balting. All through our lives you have relieved yourself about that. Always. Do I remember? Is there a thing I forget? Your ill-concealed envy of my—my genius, and your attempts to compensate your inferiority by all those petty triumphs over women—and me. Envy, incarnate envy: that is you, Chiffan. You, the cheerful friend with a sneer! And still you are unsatisfied. Now you would like to see all that I have done, undone. You want to see me and my revolution—yes, my Revolution—prostrate and shattered. You would welcome back a thousand things I have dismissed, just to spite me, just for the satisfaction of seeing my name and my pictures taken out of the schools, just to stifle the love the people bear me all over the world. That's what you can't endure, Chiffan. That's why you come here spitting malice and venom at me. Taking the risk. What a long story it makes from first to last! Haunting your mistresses under my nose! Always you have done that. Winding up with that painted wife of yours! You are virile aren't you? You! I've had to be continent while you've had the fun, Chiffan the free and easy; Chiffan who says what he likes and does what he likes; Chiffan the gay smiler; Chiffan the debonair! The play boy of the revolution! While old friend Rud is the Power Grub. Poor old Rud. Shrunken old Rud. But now—and now—we come to a reckoning. Now the Power Grub has you."

Chiffan stood stunned in front of this fantastic outbreak of long-hidden resentment.

"Well," said Rud, "you chose to come to me and ask for it. It was only an anticipation——. It wouldn't have been long before Thirp came for you. I know about you. You have been watched. You have been overheard.'

He stopped short, resolute but unable to say clearly the purpose in his mind. The two old associates stared at one another.

"So its like that," said Chiffan at last.

"How else can it be?"

Chiffan shrugged his shoulders.

"I have known——. I have felt it coming. And yet—it's incredible."

"Inevitable. Incredible to you perhaps. While you have been dreaming, Chiffan, about this dear, dear old friendship of ours and how you could always win me over when-ever you wanted to do so, I have kept wide awake. Wide awake. You come here to tell me all sorts of things, but now you have been told something, fair and square. Is there any need to say more?"

Chiffan stood still and silent for a long second or so. But Rud had finished. The audience was at an end. Then slowly and meditatively Chiffan spoke.

"I'm not sorry, Rud, for what I've done for you in the past. Whatever I have done for you. We've had a great time together with this little world."

"We!" said Rud.

"Yes—we. I taught you many things. At the start. . . . And—like all plots who're dropped, I don't like to think of you without me. Silly, isn't it? . . ."

Rud made no answer. He stood sullenly mulish.

"Good bye," said Chiffan.

And then: "Good bye, Rud."

There was no answer.

He walked down the long slant slowly, resisting its urgency to quicken his steps—never once looking back.

Rud remained silent and motionless until the door had closed on Chiffan.

He went to the great desk. There for a little space he was immobile. At last he pressed the telephone button and gave Thirp formal orders for Chiffan's arrest.

"Tell Rothberg to deal with him," he said.

"Do you mean this?" asked Thirp and for once he sounded overawed.

"Yes," said Rud, "I mean it."

He held his telephone and there came no sound of replacement from the other end.

Perhaps Thirp would say something that would alter the situation. Nothing came. He must have put down his instrument noiselessly.

Something caught at Rud's throat. His indignation evaporated. He felt that Chiffan had dealt very badly with him and forced this tragic situation upon him. He had made Chiffan. Yes, Chiffan was his making. He had discovered him a tramp on the roadside. He had liked his freakish humor. And—it was true—they had had good times together. They had been young together, and that in itself is to have a good time. Before the terrible responsibilities of power forced them apart. There had been a sort of friendship. . . .

He stood telephone in hand. He raised it to recall Thirp, but Thirp was still waiting there in silence.

"Yes?" said Thirp at once, receptive and colorless.

Rud hesitated.

"Let everything be done—with the utmost consideration," he said and then slowly replaced the instrument.

CHAPTER XLVI

THIRP FALLS OUT

One moonlight summer night a few weeks later Thirp was murdered by a young man to whom for some reason he had held out dazzling prospects of promotion and then disappointed. The particulars of his death are no part of this history, only its suddenness and its effect upon Rud concern us here.

Once more for a brief final phase of lucidity he realized his own personal inefficiency. Once more he felt matters beyond his management were being forced into his hands. It was a greater loss even than Bodisham, because while Bodisham left him diagrams and projects, plain, open and completely understandable, Thirp had been deliberately secretive. He had always kept his methods to himself. Rud did not know very much even about his agent's immediate underlings and now for a time at least, until he could gain a controlling knowledge of them, he must be his own watch-dog. Rothberg came to him at once obviously intent to play the same confidential role that Thirp had filled so satisfactorily. But Rud did not like Rothberg. The evil in his nature had none of the redeeming dilettantism of Thirpp; he made Rud feel unsafe with him; he was of the hard, dark police type who hated his quarry, took every advantage in the hunt and exulted self-righteously in a kill. Now Thirp had always behaved as though a political murder was a sadly regrettable necessity. For him it was a curious aspect of this strange, unaccountable game of life. He made Rud feel that though he could inflict death, he would never inflict wanton humiliation. He would do everything as it were under protest—though quite effectively. But Rothberg flushed with zealous animosity when he heard the mere name of a marked man.

Rothberg's impulse for self-assertion through destruction was far cruder in its expression than Thirp's cruder even than Rud's. He was not merely a killer; he liked to stamp them down.

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NORVEL TALKS TREASON

Norvel's theory that the Dictator was a necessary evil and that the forces of progressive adaptation could live through and live down any Dictatorship, was losing its validity with every fresh aggression of Rud's. And Norvel was losing his temper. As one intrusion of the political police into his new universities and school organizations followed another, as he found even his best school teachers were being terrorized, his clearest thinkers silenced and his carefully planned instruction in biology, history and social science more or less systematically and ignorantly confused, revised or suppressed, he began, reluctantly enough at first and then without reluctance, to scheme for the restraint and elimination of Rud.

He was not a good conspirator. He had begun as a publisher and propagandist and he had grown into an educator; these are outspoken activities, and he did not know how to set about any secret plotting. He sounded several of his colleagues. Neither Bellacourt nor Holbank nor Roots seemed to be greatly stirred by the suppression of thought and discussion. They were entirely preoccupied by their own immense jobs, they were interfered with very little, as yet. It seemed a matter of secondary importance to them who was fed, clothed, carried about by their always more competent material organizations. They disliked the idea of any disturbance of this vast rationalization of the world general economy. They wanted things to go on as they were going. But Heming, who was in control of the world's health and Lacoste, who was a sort of Minister for a miscellany of biological services, wilderness conversatoion, deep sea conservation, genetic reorganization, a service leading possibly to human eugenics, population regulation and the like, were in closer contact with the mental organization of the world. Their work overlapped Norvel's at a number of contacts, and their general outlook was very similar to his. They disliked the systematic falsification of human relations by this new sort of absolute monarchy quite as much as Norvel.

So that when they found themselves in conference upon a project of Lacoste's for eliminating various infections, disease carriers and insect pests once and for all from human experience, it was natural and easy to fall into a discussion of the ever-intensifying World Dictatorship.

They had dismissed the assistants, secretaries and stencographers; they sat together at the end of the long table in the main conference chamber of the Education Office and their voices dropped to undertones. Now and then one or other of them would glance over his shoulder to be sure that they were still alone.

"Well?" said Lacoste watching the departure of the last secretary.

"We did not mention all sorts of things," said Heming; "for various good reasons. We seem to go about our business in blinkers. I have been feeling all along that the gist of our discussion was unspoken."

Norvel sat with his arms folded on the table. "Can things go on much longer?" he asked, "as they are going?"

"Things are so secret," said Lacoste. "I only heard about Chiffan six days ago."

"Chiffan?" asked Heming.

"Shot," said Norvel.

Heming shut his mouth tight, saying not a word. His astonishment was more eloquent than any outcry.

Norvel looked at him. "Something has to be done," said Norvel.

"And what do you think has to be done?" said Lacoste.

"That is the riddle," said Heming.

"This new world of ours is merely a scaffolding—so far," said Norvel. "A struggle for the leadership might bring it all down. Can we bear to see this World Revolution lose its headway, as the Russian Revolution did when Stalin and Trotsky fell out? I would rather be boiled in oil, than destroy the work that has been done already, that he as leader has done,—the ending of war, peace throughout the world."

"But he himself is beginning to destroy it," said Heming.

"They are increasing the secret police," said Lacoste. "They have been interfering lately with the collection of our vital statistics. They want to inspect the confidential answers to our questionnaires in one or two places where they are after people. People who have been denounced."

(To be Continued)

"That infernal little weasel Rothberg wants to found a special college for detectives," said Norvel.

"What will you do about those confidential answers?" asked Heming of Lacoste.

"Hold them as long as possible and then burn them if we're pressed."

"But then your people will get arrested."

Lacoste shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no prospect of an insurrection— anywhere?" speculated Heming.

"Do we want an insurrection?" said Norvel. "I don't think so. Partial insurrections are quite possible. They are probable. There's plenty of inflammatory stuff in Islam for example. But that sort of thing means disorder, disintegration. And as a matter of fact, and it's more a matter of fact every year, the young the masses of young people, white, black, brown or yellow everywhere, believe in Rud, swear by him. They identify him completely with the new world. . . . No one of us ever foresaw the tremendous power of modern mind-moulding. The old Nazi and Soviet methods have been deve oped now to a tremendous efficiency. From the infants' school on. The young don't understand how it is with us. They would not understand any move to limit or restrain him. The mischief's done. I do not see how we can disentangle ourselves from this,—this Tyranny without a social disaster."

"How long may he live?" asked Lacoste. "He looks pretty ill at times. He keeps changing his doctors."

"He's a nervous wreck," said Heming. "But still he may live for years. It's mental strain with him far more than bodily. Quite possible he'll go mad."

"That won't help us," said Norvel grimly.

"If he went quite obviously mad," said Lacoste. "So plainly mad that We could hustle him into a mental hospital—?"

Norvel turned to Heming with a new idea. "Even if he wasn't mad," he said, and left the suggestion at that.

"He chooses his own attendants. It would be impossible," said Heming, thinking it over.

"Some accident," said Lacoste.

"You mean, in one word, assassination?" said Norvel.

"Open assassination — unless it was done by an actual certifiable lunatic—on some personal score. . . . No." Lacoste shook his head. "It would be a tremendous social shock. Rothberg might jump the situation. No, I mean an accident—an airplan, a car."

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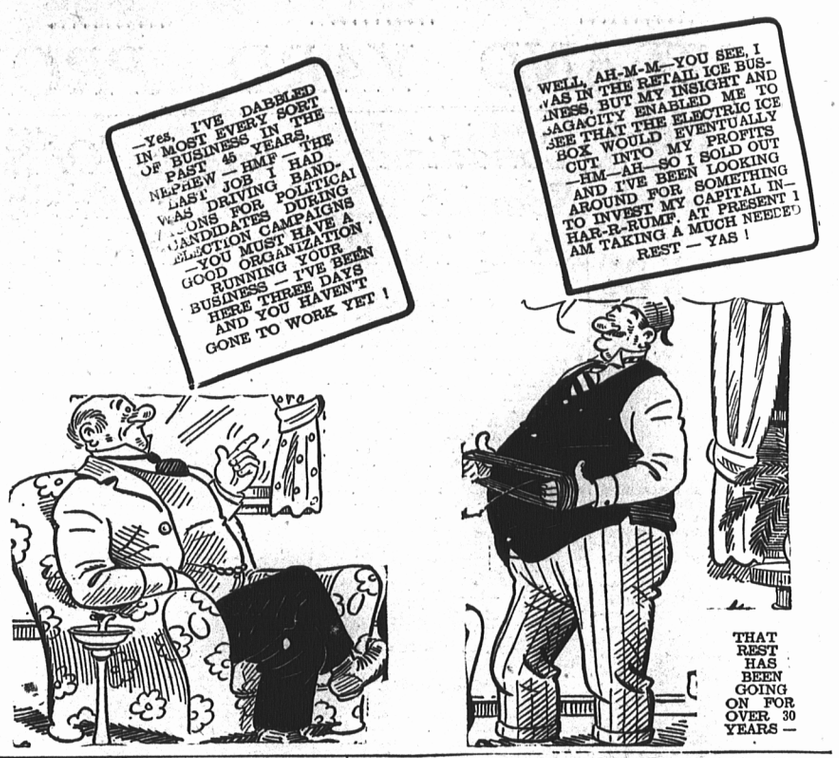

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