The long shadow: Robert Hamer after Ealing

PHILIP KEMP

LOUIS MAZZINI, SERIAL killer and tenth Duke of Chalfont, emerges from jail, cleared of the murder for which he was about to hang. Waiting for him, along with two attractive rival widows, is a bowler-hatted little man from a popular magazine bidding for his memoirs. ‘My memoirs?’ murmurs Louis, the faintest spasm of panic ruffling his urbanity, and we cut to a pile of pages lying forgotten in the condemned cell: the incriminating manuscript that occupied his supposed last hours on earth.

So ends Robert Hamer’s best-known film, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949). It’s an elegant, teasing sign-off from a movie that has teased us elegantly all through – luring us into complicity with its cool, confidential voice-over, holding us at arm’s length with its deadpan irony. The final gag, with an amused shrug, invites us to pick our own ending: Louis triumphant, retrieving his manuscript, poised for glory and prosperity; or Louis disgraced, doomed by his own hand. (For the US version, the Breen Office priggishly demanded an added shot of the memoirs in the hands of the authorities.)

Films have an eerie habit of mirroring the conditions of their own making – and of their makers. Or is it that we can’t resist reading such reflections into them, indulging ourselves in the enjoyable shudder of the unwitting premonition? Either way, *Kind Hearts*’ ambiguous close seems to foreshadow the options facing Hamer himself on its completion. His finest film to date, it could have led to a dazzling career. Instead, it marked the high-point before an abrupt and irreversible decline. Apart from Preston Sturges, it’s hard to think of another director who has fallen so far so fast.

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Kind Hearts confirmed Hamer as one of the most individual of British directors, only four years after his directorial debut. Like many of his contemporaries, he got his break at Michael Balcon's Ealing Studios. He started out as a clapper-boy at Gaumont-British, graduated to the cutting-room at London Films (where 'I had the inestimable good fortune to be put to work for Erich Pommer') and joined Ealing as an editor in 1940. Balcon liked to advance promising young men, and editors in particular: Hamer was promoted to producer on *San Demetrio London* (1943) and got his chance to direct when the credited director, Charles Frend, fell ill. He did the same on *Fiddlers Three* (1944), taking over from Harry Watt, and having proved himself was assigned an episode of the omnibus ghost film, *Dead of Night* (1945).¹

Hamer's episode, 'The Haunted Mirror', locates him on the shadow side of Ealing, in the maverick strain that included Alberto Cavalcanti and Alexander Mackendrick. The episode not only conjures up a dark, dangerous world of violence and sexuality, but finds it perversely attractive. (It also introduces Hamer's key motif of the malign, enticing alter ego.) To the disquiet of the morally strait-laced Balcon, these subversive elements resurfaced in Hamer's first two features, the Victorian melodrama *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945) and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947), a fair shot at transplanting Prévert/Carné poetic realism into an English context. In both films, respectable family values come under threat from anti-social forces: in *Pink String* the glitzy, ruthless demi-monde of a Brighton pub; in *Rains* a convict ex-lover on the run. In the end the lowlifes are defeated, but with them all vitality drains out of the films. What's left is the family structure, smug and suffocating. As if settling the score, Hamer proceeded to make a film that 'paid no regard whatever to established, although not practised, moral convention, in which a whole family is picked off by a mass murderer'.²

Balcon hated the idea of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* ('I'm not going to make a comedy about eight murders'), but capitulated to a united front of Ealing's top creative personnel. What alarmed him about the finished film, though, wasn't the violence but the sexual charge of the scenes involving Joan Greenwood's deliciously manipulative Sibella.³ He demanded they be toned down; Hamer indignantly refused. The disagreement flared into a public row – a rare event at Ealing, where quiet conciliation and compromise were the norm. (None of which deterred Balcon, when *Kind Hearts* was released, from publicly hailing it as being 'an entirely new level of comedy', and 'the best film we have made'.)⁴

For his next film, Hamer embarked on an adaptation of *The Shadow and the Peak*, a novel by Richard Mason (author of *The World of Suzie Wong*). Set in Jamaica, the story has (for its period) a high erotic content, which

Hamer intended to retain. He planned a location shoot in the West Indies, with Vivien Leigh for the female lead. Unhappy about the subject matter – and the budget – Balcon reluctantly secured the rights and gave Hamer the go-ahead. With pre-production well advanced, he suddenly changed his mind. Furious, Hamer quit Ealing on the spot.

The break would have come anyway, sooner or later. Ealing, with its upbeat, wholesome ethos, was no place for a man who wanted ‘to make films about people in dark rooms doing beastly things to each other’.⁵ A more devious film-maker like Mackendrick would contrive ways of sneaking his ‘perverted and malicious sense of humour’ into seemingly anodyne subjects, insidiously subverting Ealing from within. But Hamer, contrary and quick-tempered, courted confrontation.⁶ He wanted to win publicly as well as privately, to have his right to make his kind of film officially conceded. It was a hopelessly unrealistic demand even at Ealing, let alone any other post-war British studio.

Between quitting Ealing in 1949 and his death in 1963 Hamer completed – or at any rate is credited with – seven more films. They’re commonly written off as bleak and emotionally atrophied, blighted by his losing battle with alcohol. ‘His later films are all disappointing,’ wrote David Thomson, voicing the consensus.⁷ And so they are, if we come to them expecting the malicious energy and suave black comedy of his masterpiece. But a masterpiece casts a long shadow, and at least four of Hamer’s post-Ealing films – *The Spider and the Fly*, *The Long Memory*, *Father Brown* and *The Scapegoat* – deserve to be brought out from under. None of them wholly works and the last of them was reduced to a mutilated torso. But they share a haunted, teeth-gritted quality that marks them out as particular to Hamer. They could have been made by no other director.

Since Ealing held the rights to *The Shadow and the Peak*, Hamer couldn’t take his unrealised project with him. Instead, he made a film about as far as he could get from the tropical sensuality of Mason’s story. *The Spider and the Fly* (1949) is set in Paris, but not the fluffy, ooh-la-la city beloved of British movies. This is a grey, grim Paris poised on the abyss of World War I, where even the nightlife has a hard professional gleam in its eye. Hamer’s protagonists, Maubert (Eric Portman) and Ledocq (Guy Rolfe), are also professionals – one a policeman, the other a criminal, united in their contempt for the fools and incompetents around them on both sides of the law.

Throughout Hamer’s later films he explores the Jekyll-and-Hyde theme of a man pitted against his *doppelgänger*, a person whom he opposes but feels tempted to resemble. Often there’s a strong undertow of homo-eroticism to the relationship. Ledocq, handsome and dashing, uses women but keeps

them at emotional arm's length. The repressed Maubert, who lives alone, nagged by an elderly housekeeper, speaks of Ledocq in the petulant tones of a discarded lover. Told that the criminal has accused him of 'having no heart', he retorts bitterly, 'He should know. He and his kind have pulled it from me piece by piece.'

Hamer was himself a suppressed homosexual. Sent down from Cambridge after an affair with a man, to the horror of his middle-class family, he tried to go straight by marrying Joan Holt, would-be actress and sister of another Ealing director, Seth Holt. Joan, strikingly beautiful but low on acting talent, matched her husband for boozing and outdid him at drunken bitchery; Diana Morgan, Ealing's only woman screenwriter and a close friend of Hamer, felt the couple were 'modelling themselves on Scott and Zelda'.⁸ After the marriage broke up in the early 1950s Hamer drifted through affairs with several women, none of them lasting long.

In *The Spider and the Fly* the attraction between Maubert and Ledocq is re-routed through Madeleine, the woman both love but neither can commit to until, by a cruel irony of the kind Hamer relished, they unwittingly join to destroy her. This unconventional triangle is twisted into unexpected shapes by moral ambiguity. Intelligent, dispassionate, sharing a sense of honour but not of loyalty, each of the three avidly exploits the others for personal ambition – rather than for love, a warm, risky emotion to be quizzically noted, then filed safely away. 'I admire you, and you say you love me,' Ledocq tells Madeleine. 'That's the best time to part.'

The ending is the bleakest in all Hamer's work. The trio – like that of *Jules et Jim* (1962) but in a darker register – self-destructs: Madeleine is led off to execution, Ledocq in effect commits suicide. The coda plays out in a nocturnal railway station where Maubert moodily watches troops embarking for Verdun and near-certain death. Among them he spots Ledocq who, exempt from conscription, has perversely volunteered. The two men exchange a wry gesture – a stripped-down précis of all those tearful railroad farewells in standard-issue war movies – before Ledocq vanishes into the train, whose closed, cattle-truck-style carriages recall other death trains in a later war.

The scene is typical of *The Spider and the Fly* in its emotional asphyxia and its night-time setting. Hamer was a practitioner of that relatively sparse genre, British noir, and all the film's prime scenes are set in noir's universal City of Dreadful Night. Daytime episodes are consigned to gloomy offices dulled by the sulky grey light of an overcast sky. *La ville lumière* this isn't, and only once does the film evoke sunlight: an insipid boating expedition on the Seine, filmed with the insolent offhandedness Hamer reserved for scenes he despised. Unevenness, as Charles Drazin notes, 'is almost the hallmark of

a Hamer film'.⁹ Strewn through all his movies (barring only *Kind Hearts*) are scenes where you sense the director sneering or yawning behind the camera; bland, conventional stuff he shot because he had to, but was damned if he'd put any effort into. A more visual director like Mackendrick could have taken refuge in technical resource. Hamer responded to banality with boredom, which he never bothered to conceal. It fits his jaundiced view of humanity that these dead stretches mostly afflict scenes of happiness. Happiness wasn't something Hamer believed in; what spoke to him were dark, destructive emotions like guilt or vengeance.

One or two Hamer films are sheer dead-stretch from start to finish. One such followed *The Spider and the Fly*, during a brief return to Ealing. This was unusual in itself; Balcon placed a high value on loyalty, and those who quit the studio were rarely allowed back. But Balcon's conscience was troubled by Hamer, whom he felt he had handled badly. He was even willing to reconsider *The Shadow and the Peak*, scheduling it among Ealing's forthcoming projects, and meantime Hamer was assigned to a filmed play, *His Excellency* (1952). The original, a West End hit about industrial unrest in a British colony, held nothing for him; he took it on as a *quid pro quo* for the film he wanted to make, and his indifference glares through every frame. In any case it was wasted effort. Once again Balcon fought shy of the Jamaican project, and Hamer left Ealing for a second time.

There was more to attract him in *The Long Memory* (1952), whose set-up is archetypal noir: a man framed for murder comes out of jail years later, bent on getting the people who put him away. Hamer's bid to create an English *Quai des brumes* is a touch too blatant, and it needed a crueller actor than John Mills (James Mason, perhaps?) for the lead. Mills does a staunch professional job, giving us the tenacity but missing the malevolence; the role calls for a cold, harsh venom that isn't within the actor's compass. What makes *The Long Memory* worth seeing is spirit of place: its exceptional use of landscape. On previous form, this was the last thing to expect from Hamer. His films had been largely studio-bound, not always to their detriment: studio artifice suits the stylised elegance of *Kind Hearts* and the shadowy claustrophobia of *The Spider and the Fly*. *The Long Memory*, though, not only uses locations but chooses a region of England few other films have exploited – the desolate mudflats of the Thames estuary beyond London where the Kent coast slumps despondently into the sea. Windswept and salt-scoured, the flats express the seared mental landscape of Davidson, the ex-con plotting revenge. Early in the film Davidson appears on the flats for the first time. Shooting in long shot from a low angle, Hamer picks up the small, stocky figure far off on the barren expanse. Instead of cutting to a close-up,

he simply holds and waits while Davidson trudges up to camera. Even before we know who he is or what he wants, we sense the distance he has to go and his bitter loneliness.

The Long Memory is a film of acutely captured detail – tacky, sleazy detail for the most part. A decade before the trumpeted naturalism of the British New Wave, Hamer was exploring townscapes far from the official picture-postcard locations. This is a scruffy, back-alley Britain of cracked pavements and corrugated-iron lean-to sheds. A petty crook's deserted wife sits in a parlour stuffed with sad, tawdry knick-knacks – china cats, samplers, cheap reproductions, a portrait of Queen Victoria. The villain's warehouse is located in Shad Thames (a richly Dickensian name) in the shadow of Tower Bridge, hemmed in by cranes and bombed-out buildings. As Davidson climbs its bare wooden stairs you hear the grime crunching underfoot. These lowlife milieux contrast with the pristine suburban home of Fay, Davidson's ex-girlfriend, whose false evidence put him away. She has married the police inspector involved in the case. (It's that kind of plot, too dovetailed for its own good.) When Davidson confronts her amid the sterile gentility of her sitting room she flings herself desperately about it like a trapped bird, terrified less at what he might do to her than at the idea of her husband or schoolboy son finding out. As so often for Hamer, domesticity is a snare.

In the event, Davidson refrains from taking physical vengeance on Fay. 'I can't be bothered ... You're not worth it.' When he catches up with the chief villain, Boyd, the idea gets a further twist. 'When it comes to the point revenge isn't worth it. You plan it and plan it, and then when it starts it makes you feel as filthy as the other person.' Again a Hamer protagonist fears turning into his opponent – with the added barb that, this time round, the gay element is displaced on to the baddies. Boyd, a suave, menacing figure, sports a fancy waistcoat, a flower in his button hole and a cockney-genteel accent. His boyfriend doubles as chauffeur and receptionist, a punkish youth slouched in a booth leafing through male-physique magazines.

The negative attraction between Davidson and Boyd skews the film, being far more intense than the nominal love interest. The heroine, a waifish East European refugee, hangs around imploring Davidson to let her stay, but Hamer's impatience with this pallid and underwritten figure is palpable. The action's also saddled with a *deus ex machina*, a creakingly symbolic tramp borrowed from *Les Portes de la nuit* (Carné and Prévert's last and weakest film together), who saves Davidson when Boyd finally hunts him down on the mudflats.

But even this scene is redeemed by its sheer physical immediacy. The landscape, a brooding presence throughout, now sides with the villain,

threatening literally to engulf the hero. Fleeing the armed Boyd, Davidson falls off a derelict barge into the mud – which holds him fast as he squirms like a beached fish. The soundtrack pitilessly captures the glutinous, squelchy noises of his struggle, and his rescue comes as reprieve from a nightmare. The plot of *The Long Memory* fades fast from the mind, but its texture stays vividly with you.

Hamer's next three films all starred Alec Guinness, a friend since *Kind Hearts*. 'We spoke the same language and laughed at the same things,' Guinness recalled; 'He was finely tuned, full of wicked glee and marvellous to actors – appreciative and encouraging.'¹⁰ The actor's remote, withdrawn persona suited the emotional obliquity of Hamer's work, and with his gallery of quirky, oddball characters Guinness was a natural for the title role in *Father Brown* (1954) as G.K. Chesterton's mild-mannered priest-detective.

The plot derives from Chesterton's story 'The Blue Cross' – a brief, straightforward tale in which the priest foils a master criminal, Flambeau, who is trying to rob him of a jewelled crucifix. Brown and Flambeau themselves hardly figure until the last page or two; the story focuses on a Sûreté detective who is trailing them. Hamer and his co-writer, Thelma Schnee, dumped the detective, reduced the cross to a McGuffin and turned the film into an extended intellectual and moral duel between priest and criminal – the central *Spider and the Fly* relationship replayed as comedy. But it is comedy of the most sombre kind. There aren't many laughs in *Father Brown*, and such as there are feel thin and uneasy, chilled by a freezing whisper of melancholia. What the film latches on to – what may well have attracted Hamer to the project in the first place – is the dark side of Chesterton, the horror squirming around under the compulsive jokiness. 'Something in the make-up of his personality,' wrote Borges, Chesterton's great admirer, 'leaned toward the nightmarish, something secret, and blind, and central.'¹¹ That would go for Hamer too, though he lacked the balances that kept Chesterton sane – his bonhomie, and the consolation he found in Catholicism.

Though not religious, Hamer felt a grudging envy for the certainties of faith – as does his surrogate in the film, played by Peter Finch with saturnine charm. A renegade aristocrat (like Ledocq in *The Spider and the Fly*), Flambeau steals not out of greed or viciousness, but to requite a world that has no place for him. 'I was trained as a good swordsman,' he tells Brown, 'but in a world of guns and bombs it is no longer ... an accomplishment to know how to die gracefully at dawn.' Instead he courts death with his criminal audacities, much as Hamer courted it with his reckless drinking.

Flambeau is Brown's quarry, body and soul – to be redeemed from crime and atheism and restored to the fold. But there's a desperation in the priest's

quest that reaches beyond piety into aching personal need. Both men, Brown in particular, seem wretchedly lonely, clutching at each other to escape a sense of futility. This Hound of Heaven pursuit reflected reality; Guinness, himself poised to convert, was urging the solace of Catholicism on Hamer. He failed – which may be why the ending, with Flambeau restoring the cross and himself to the bosom of the church, doesn't seem complacent, just miserably lacking in conviction.

Once more an attraction between mirror-image opposites dominates the film. (Flambeau likes to disguise himself as a priest; Brown has some skill as a pickpocket.) The only significant female character – Joan Greenwood, sadly wasted – is even sketchier than her counterpart in *The Long Memory*. Now and again, suddenly recalling that he's making a comedy, Hamer tosses in a spot of slapstick, but his heart isn't in it. When Brown consults a librarian (Ernest Thesiger as yet another lonely obsessive), the two men are made to teeter on high ladders and lose their spectacles. The effect is irritating and embarrassing, as though two pensive, dignified birds – a pair of storks, say – had been press-ganged into a circus and induced to juggle.

Physical comedy was never Hamer's forte, as was all too plain from his next film. Dispiritingly jocular, *To Paris with Love* (1955) blunders into every frou-frou cliché about the French capital that *The Spider and the Fly* so dourly rejected. A father (Guinness) and son visit Paris, where each meets a Frenchwoman his own age but falls for the other one. The Brits are inhibited but susceptible; the French gesticulate and address each other in comic-accented English. The whole affair would deserve utter oblivion had it not foreshadowed Hamer's next project, the great unrealised film that haunted the remaining years of his life.

Although *For Each the Other* was never made, Hamer's shooting script survives. It makes poignant reading. Into it he poured everything of himself – his melancholia, his wit, his wistful francophilia and his conviction that life had dealt him a rotten hand. It may be that the script is better than any film of it could have been at the time. Today Hamer's doom-laden romanticism might come through unscathed, but in 1950s Britain some crass happy ending would surely have been imposed.

The script is adapted from a French play, *L'Âme en peine* by Jean-Jacques Bernard. At its heart is the passage in Plato's *Symposium* where Aristophanes explains sexual attraction: that human beings were originally perfect spheres until the malicious gods sliced them all in half. Since then each half yearns to reunite with its fellow, and roams the earth embracing countless others in the hope of finding the one true match.

The three main characters are Marceline, a beautiful and intelligent

Frenchwoman, obscurely discontented; her husband Philip, an English country gentleman, kindly and comfortable though not stupid; and Anthony, handsome and raffish, who offhandedly runs a London bookshop and drifts from one half-hearted liaison to another. Marceline and Anthony are destined soulmates. Their paths, in England and France, repeatedly cross but never quite meet until, at a hunt, they instinctively recognise each other. Marceline's horse, scared by a low-flying plane, bolts and Anthony gallops after her. Both are killed.

Charming, cultured and dissipated, Anthony is an unmistakable self-portrait, revealing a chilling degree of self-awareness. Hamer, it's clear, knew exactly what he was doing to himself. Such merciless lucidity recalls a line of Zola's (about the writing of *Thérèse Raquin*) Hamer once quoted to explain the kind of films he wanted to make: 'J'ai simplement essayé ce que fait un chirurgien sur deux cadavres'.¹²

The script's chief weakness is its mannered tone. Anthony is given to musings on malign Fate, the 'croupier in the sky ... who's in charge of disappointments, thwartings, frustrations ... He waits until it will hurt most. He'll let the stars grow even more beautiful before he decides to turn them into rats' eyes'. (It isn't only Anthony who talks like this. Referring to Marceline, the supposedly prosaic Philip speaks of 'some deep, central, reasonless insufficiency which is private to her'.) But the overwritten dialogue – which Hamer would no doubt have toned down before shooting – never detracts from the agonised intensity behind the words. Hamer was too sophisticated to believe in the ideal Other, but his script throbs with a desperate wish that he could.

Guessing that Rank, producers of the inane *To Paris with Love*, would hardly appreciate his latest offering, Hamer turned once again to Michael Balcon. Balcon was impressed by the script's qualities but doubted its commercial appeal. Hamer, though, was still on his conscience, so *For Each the Other* was announced as a forthcoming production, with Peter Finch pencilled in for Anthony, and Hamer was given an interest-free loan of £2,700 to secure the rights to Bernard's play. But by the late 1950s Balcon's power base was shrinking. Ealing Studios were sold in 1955, and he was now running Ealing Films from a corner of the MGM lot at Borehamwood. In theory the unit was autonomous; in practice any project had to be sold to the Metro hierarchy. When Ealing finally folded in 1959, *For Each the Other* was still in limbo.

In 1958, to compound Hamer's frustration, there appeared a film version of *The Shadow and the Peak*. Produced for Rank, who had picked up the rights when their deal with Ealing lapsed, *The Passionate Summer* was scripted

(flatly) by Joan Henry, directed (turgidly) by Rudolph Cartier and acted (stolidly) by Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna. If Hamer hadn't long since been driven to drink, this film would have been enough to do it.

To keep himself occupied, and to pay off his loan, Hamer took on another film for Balcon, *The Scapegoat* (1959), adapted from a novel by Daphne du Maurier. The troubled project had already run through multiple scripts and several possible directors, including Laslo Benedek, David Lean and George Cukor. (So improbable a trio hints eloquently at desperation. Kenneth Tynan, Ealing's script editor, even suggested Ingmar Bergman.) Though Balcon was producing, Ealing had no financial interest in the film. Production control was split between MGM and an ad hoc partnership of Alec Guinness and du Maurier herself – the only terms on which the novelist would make the rights available. It was an arrangement calculated to enthuse no one: not MGM, who resented having Guinness imposed as the lead, nor Balcon, who noted worriedly that 'neither du Maurier nor Guinness ... have the slightest conception how to organise and start a picture'.¹³ Du Maurier disliked every version of the script submitted to her, taking particular exception to the final version by Gore Vidal. Her comments incensed Hamer, who described them as 'a compound of stupidity, ego-mania and gross bad manners', and demanded to be taken off the picture.¹⁴ It took all Balcon's diplomacy to smooth everyone's ruffled feathers.

On the face of it, *The Scapegoat* looks like an ideal Hamer subject. Once again a disaffected loner tangles with his alter ego – literally his double this time, since the film pushes Hamer's *doppelgänger* theme to its extreme. John Barrett, a college professor of French on holiday in 'the France I love so well', ponders the lukewarm void of his existence: 'Only a few personal belongings and a blank life ... Nothing in the past to be particularly ashamed of – nothing, in the future. Perhaps a man has to be empty before he can be used'. And used he is, by his evil twin Count Jacques de Gué (also played by Guinness), who sees in the Englishman a chance to get shot of his debts, discontented wife and importunate family.

The film sets out in Hamer's most authentically downbeat vein, with Barrett musing as he clears French customs, 'You can't declare an emptiness of the heart' – neatly defining the malady afflicting so many Hamer protagonists. (A brief glimpse of his passport shows his birthplace as Porlock, home of the visitor said to have interrupted Coleridge in the mid-flow of 'Kubla Khan'. Barrett is Superfluous Man par excellence.) Early scenes capture the nightmare mood: a man tracked by his double through the darkened streets of an old town, like a scene from *The Student of Prague*. Even when the two are seated together in a cafe the other-worldly dread

lingers. ‘You couldn’t perhaps be the Devil?’ asks de Gué ironically. ‘No – could you perhaps?’ responds Barrett, only half joking. He could, almost. Getting Barrett drunk, de Gué hijacks his clothes and his identity, leaving his own in unfair exchange. Hung over and dismayed, Barrett is driven off to de Gué’s chateau where his protests are brushed aside as another of Jacques’ sadistic jokes. So far, the nightmare holds – the horror of finding yourself trapped in another man’s bad dream, guilty of his past, ignorant of everything you ought to know. But from here on the fabric of the film wears steadily thinner: mood and tension drain away, vital plot elements are fudged and the film crumbles down to a botched and perfunctory ending.

The failure of *The Scapegoat* is usually put down to Hamer’s declining powers, but on all the evidence he can’t be blamed for the mess. The brooding atmosphere of the opening, and random flashes of dramatic power thereafter, suggest he succeeded in weaving a taut moral spider’s web out of du Maurier’s melodramatic original. With its theme of the principled commoner taking on and finally supplanting the decadent aristocrat, *The Scapegoat* could even have stood as a serious counterpart to *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. All we have, though, is what was left after MGM had taken a blunt axe to it. Hamer’s original cut ran just on two hours. Metro chopped out some forty minutes, spliced in ‘clarifying’ material directed by the film’s editor, Jack Harris, and dubbed on a new score by in-house composer Bronislau Kaper. Balcon, aging and weary, fought the cuts for a time but at last gave in. Viewing the final result, Hamer vainly tried to have his name taken off the credits.

The débâcle of *The Scapegoat* finished him. He had promised Balcon to stay off the booze throughout the shoot, and he kept his promise. The cinematographer, Paul Beeson, remembers him on location in France recommending a local wine. ‘We’d all be drinking around him, and he wouldn’t touch it. He was on some white tablets, God knows what they were. You could see him suffering. He’d come out in a greasy cold sweat and take another of these bloody tablets.’¹⁵ The moment the final shot, on the quayside at Boulogne, was in the can Hamer took off on an almighty bender. He had to be poured back on to the ferry, and tried to pick a fight with the Customs at Dover.

The ruin of his film convinced him the effort just wasn’t worth it. There was one more movie bearing his name as director: *School for Scoundrels* (1960), a comedy based on Stephen Potter’s cynical ‘Lifemanship’ books. Much of it was directed by Cyril Frankel, asked to take over after Hamer showed up drunk on set one morning.

It was terribly sad. One couldn't help him ... I said, 'I won't take it over, Robert, what I will do is hold the reins for you provided you promise you'll go into hospital for a week and get over this.' We shook hands on that, but he didn't go into hospital and didn't get better. So I finished the film, did the basic editing, then Robert came in to do the final edit.¹⁶

Frankel insisted Hamer take sole directorial credit.

Hamer's last few years were a fast downhill slide; not even the hope of making his pet project could keep him level for long. In May 1960 his agent, Dennis van Thal, wrote to Balcon, 'The "problem" really seems a thing of the past. Robert still has the rights of *For Each the Other* and ... seemed very appreciative of your continued interest in the subject'.¹⁷ But two weeks later he reported, 'I feel in all honesty I must tell you that Robert did a "flip" yesterday ... I wrote to him yesterday to say I could not do anything for him unless and until he was completely cured'.¹⁸ By mid-1961 Balcon, now heading the Bryanston group, had given up on Hamer as a director. 'At one time,' he told an associate, 'Robert Hamer insisted that [*For Each the Other*] should be directed by him, but I now believe that the rights can be acquired without any trouble.'¹⁹

Scriptwriting was the only job left open. Hamer worked for a while on an adaptation of C.E. Vulliamy's 1920s black comedy *Don among the Dead Men*, about an Oxford don who bumps off rival colleagues. The film was offered to Charles Crichton, who turned it down, finding the main character too unpleasant. It was eventually directed by Don Chaffey as *A Jolly Bad Fellow* – a feeble echo of *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. Hamer's final credit was 'additional dialogue', on Nicholas Ray's sprawling *55 Days at Peking* (1963). Before it was released he was dead, aged 52.

In *For Each the Other*, the work into which he put more of himself than any other, Hamer wrote:

People think they have some right to be happy, and are doubly unhappy because they are not. It is only when they come to accept that the natural human salary is one of unhappiness, and that interims of happiness come as a bonus and must be hungrily seized and savoured, that they have a chance of coming out anywhere near even in the unequal contest with fate.

With a little adjustment – 'Directors think they have some right to make the films they want to', perhaps? – he could have applied the same message to his own career, but such wise detachment was never in his character. He remained doubly unhappy, and came out a lot worse than even.

Hamer was in the wrong country at the wrong time. It wasn't only Ealing: at that period there wasn't a studio in Britain – or in Hollywood, most likely – that could have accommodated his savage, sombre vision. (He might have

done better across the Channel; an industry with room for Carné, Clouzot and Bresson could easily have accepted Hamer. But for all his passion for France he seems never to have tried working there.) His later films, dismissed as the sad products of alcoholic decline, can equally be seen as his response to the frustrations he was undergoing, desperate attempts at self-expression by a thwarted talent. Balcon's verdict on Hamer is often quoted, that 'he was engaged on a process of self-destruction'.²⁰ True, but the process was hastened by an industry that could find no place for such an exceptional and idiosyncratic film-maker.

Notes

- 1 Freda Bruce Lockhart, 'Conversation with Robert Hamer', *Sight and Sound* 21, 2 (October–December 1951), p. 74.
- 2 Hamer, quoted in John Russell Taylor (ed.), *Kind Hearts and Coronets: Masterworks of the British Cinema* (Lorrimer, 1974), p. 9.
- 3 Author's conversation with Charles Crichton (26 March 1991).
- 4 'Sir Michael Balcon on ... Martyrs to Fun', *Picturegoer* (6 August 1949), p. 6.
- 5 Author's conversation with Monja Danischewsky (26 May 1991).
- 6 Interview with Alexander Mackendrick for *Omnibus*: 'Ealing', BBC-TV (2 May 1986).
- 7 David Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema* (Secker & Warburg, 1980), p. 245.
- 8 Author's conversation with Diana Morgan (27 February 1991).
- 9 Charles Drazin, 'Robert Hamer', *London Magazine* (February–March 1994), p. 125.
- 10 Alec Guinness, *Blessings in Disguise* (Hamish Hamilton, 1985), p. 199.
- 11 Quoted by Marie Smith in her foreword to *Daylight and Nightmare: Uncollected Stories and Fables by G.K. Chesterton* (Xanadu Publications, 1986), p. 7.
- 12 Freda Bruce Lockhart, 'Conversation with Robert Hamer', in *Sight and Sound* (October–December 1951).
- 13 Letter from Michael Balcon to George Muchnic of Loew's Inc. (25 February 1957), Michael Balcon Collection, British Film Institute.
- 14 Memorandum from Robert Hamer to Michael Balcon (21 February 1958), Michael Balcon Collection, BFI.
- 15 Author's conversation with Paul Beeson (13 January 1993).
- 16 Author's conversation with Cyril Frankel (9 March 1991).
- 17 Letter from Dennis van Thal to Michael Balcon (25 May 1960), Michael Balcon Collection, BFI.
- 18 Letter from Dennis van Thal to Michael Balcon (10 June 1960), Michael Balcon Collection, BFI.
- 19 Letter from Michael Balcon to Maxwell Setton (18 May 1961), Michael Balcon Collection, BFI.
- 20 Michael Balcon, *Michael Balcon Presents ... A Lifetime of Films* (Hutchinson, 1969), p. 163.

Quotations from the screenplay of *For Each the Other* are taken from a copy of Hamer's unpublished script loaned to the author by the late Diana Morgan.