

CHAPTER I

AN ARM OUTSTRETCHED

THE evangel of the Lord Paramount of England was swift and direct.

Clad thinly in the incorporated identity of Mr. Parham, the Senior Tutor of St. Simon's, publicist and historian, sustained at the outset by the wealth of this strangely subdued Sir Bussy which he commandeered without scruple, waited upon in a state of awe stricken devotion by Hereward Jackson, and attended hygienically by the cowed and convinced Sir Titus Knowles, the Master Spirit, without haste and without delay, imposed his personality upon the national imagination. Without delay and yet without apparent haste, he set about the task for which he had become incarnate.

With unerring judgment he chose and summoned his supporters to his side and arranged what in the case of any inferior type would have been called a vulgar publicity campaign. That is the first necessary phase in any sort of human leadership. To begin with, one must be known. Vulgarization is the road to empire. By that the most fine-minded of men must come to power, if they would have power. The careers of Cæsar and Napoleon opened with a bold operation of the contemporary means of publicity. They could open in no other way.

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The country was weary of parliamentary government, weary of a conservatism which did not reduce the taxes upon property and enterprise to a minimum, weary of a liberalism that it could not trust to maintain overwhelming but inexpensive armaments, weary of the unintelligible bickerings of liberalism and labour, weary of the growing spectre of unemployment, weary of popular education, religious discussion, and business uncertainty, disappointed by peace and dismayed at the thought of war, neurasthenic and thoroughly irritable and distressed. The papers it read attacked the government and would not support the opposition. Politics could not escape from personalities, and none of the personalities succeeded in being more than actively undignified or industriously dull. Everybody nagged everybody. Trade was bad, the new talking movies a clanging disappointment, courtly cricket more and more tedious, and the influenza hung about maddeningly. Whenever one tried to do anything one found one had a cold. Criticism and literature fostered discord with whatever was old and would not countenance hope for anything new. Aimless scepticism was the "thing." Nobody seemed to know where to go or what to do, and the birth rate and death rate, falling together, witnessed together to the general indecisiveness. The weather was moody and treacherous. The general election had pleased nobody. It had taken power out of the hands of a loyal if dull conservative majority, faithful to the honoured traditions of an expanding empire, and transferred it to the control

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of a vague and sentimental idealism in which nobody believed. The country was ripe for some great change.

It was at a mass gathering of the Amalgamated Patriotic Societies in the Albert Hall, convened not very hopefully to protest against any pampering of the unemployed by their fellows on the government benches, that the Lord Paramount, still thinly personating the vanished Mr. Parham, rose, like a beneficent star upon the British horizon. When he stood up to speak he was an unknown man except to the elect few to whom he had already revealed himself. When at last, amidst an unparalleled storm of enthusiasm, he resumed his seat, he was already and irrevocably leader of a national renaissance. The residue of the agenda was washed away and forgotten in the wild storm of enthusiasm that beat upon the platform.

Yet his *début* was made with the very minimum of artificiality. His voice rang clear and true into the remotest circles of that great place; the handsome pallor of his face, lit ever and again by an extraordinarily winning smile, focussed every eye. His bearing was inaggressive, and yet his whole being radiated an extraordinary magnetism. His gestures were restrained but expressive; the chief of them the throwing out of a beautifully formed hand. "Who is this man," whispered a thousand lips, "that we have never known of him before?"

His speech was entirely devoid of rhetorical gymnastics. His style can be best described as one of colossal simplicity. He touched the familiar

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and obvious to a new life. His discourse carried along platitudes as hosts carry time-honoured banners and one familiar phrase followed another, like exiled leaders refreshed and renewed returning to their people. With a few closely knit phrases he gathered together the gist of the previous speakers. Some of them had been perhaps a trifle querulous, over-explicit, or lengthy, and it was marvellous how he plucked the burning heart from the honest and yet plaintive copiousness that had preceded him and held it out, a throbbing and beating indignation. It was true, he conceded, that our working classes, under the poisonous infection of foreign agitators, deteriorated daily; it was true that art and literature had become the vehicles of a mysterious malaria, true that science was mischievous and miasmatic and that the very pulpit and altar were touched by doubt. It was true that our young people had lost all sense of modesty in the poisoned chalice of pleasure and that our growing hosts of unemployed seemed to lack even the will to invent anything to do. Nevertheless . . .

For a moment his golden voice held its great audience in the immense expectation of that over-arching word. Then, very gently and clearly and sweetly, it told of what Britain had been to the world and what she still might be, this little island, this jewel in the forehead of the world, this precious jewel, this crowned imperial jewel, set in the stormy frosted silver of the seas. For, after all, these workers of ours—properly safeguarded—were still the best in the world, and their sons and

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daughters heirs of the mightiest tradition that had ever been hewn from the crucibles of time. (No time to correct that; it had to go. The meaning was plain.) Superficially our land might seem to have given way to a certain lassitude. That made it all the more urgent that we should thrust all masks and misconceptions aside now, and stand forth again in this age of the world's direst need, the mighty race, the race of leaders and adventurers that we were and had always been. *But . . .*

— Again a moment of expectation; every face in that quintessential assembly intent.

Was all our pride and hope to be dashed and laid aside to subserve the manœuvres of a handful of garrulous politicians and their parasites and dupes? Was Britain to be forever gagged by its infatuation with elected persons and the national voice of our great people belied by the tediums and dishonesties of a parliamentary institution that had long outlived its use? Through years of impatience the passionate negative had been engendering itself in our indignant hearts. Let us borrow a phrase from an unexpected quarter. The poor rebels on the outer fringe of the Socialist party, that fringe the Socialist party was so anxious to deny, the Bolsheviki, the Communistky, the Cooks and Maxtons, and so forth, used a phrase that went far beyond their courage. That phrase was Direct Action. Not for such as they were, was the realization of so tremendous a suggestion. For direct action could be a great and glorious thing. It could be the

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drawing of the sword of righteousness. It could be the launching of the thunderbolt. The time had come, the hour was striking, for honest men and true women and all that was real and vital in our national life to think of Direct Action, to prepare for Direct Action; to discipline themselves for the hour of Direct Action, when they would hold and maintain, strike and spare not.

For some moments the Master Spirit was like a strong swimmer in a tumultuous sea of applause. As the tumult fell to attention again he sketched out his line of action very briefly and so came to his peroration. "I ask you to return to the essential, the substantial things of life," he said. "Here I stand for plain and simple things—for King and Country, for Religion and Property, for Order and Discipline, for the Peasant on the Land and for all Men at their Work and Duty, for the Rightness of the Right, the Sacredness of Sacred Things and all the Fundamental Institutions of Mankind."

He remained standing. The voice died away. For some moments there was a great stillness and then a sound like "Ah!"—a long universal "Ah!" and then a thunder of expression that rose and rose. English audiences they say are hard to move, but this one was on fire. Everyone stood. Everyone sought the relief of gesticulation. All the great hall seemed to be pressing and pouring down towards its Master made manifest. Everywhere were shining eyes and extended hands. "Tell us what to do," cried a hundred voices. "Show us what to do. Lead us!" Fresh people seemed to

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be flowing into the place as those who had been there throughout pressed down the gangways. How they responded! Surely of all gifts of power that God gives his creatures that of oratory has the swiftest reward! The Lord Paramount faced his conquered audience, and within, restored to the religious confidence of an earlier time, he thanked his God.

It was impossible to leave things at that point; some immediate action was needed. "What are we to tell them to do?" pressed the chairman.

"Form a league," said the Master simply.

Hands were held up to command silence. The chairman's thin voice could be heard reiterating the suggestion. "Yes, form a league," thundered the multitude. "What are we to call the league?"

"League of Duty," suggested Hereward Jackson, jammed close to the Master.

"The Duty Paramount League," said the Master, his voice cutting through the uproar like the sweep of a sword. The multitude vibrated upon that.

A little speechifying followed, heard eagerly but impatiently. The League, someone said, was to be the Fascisti of Britain. There were loud cries of "British Fascisti" and "The English Duce" (variously pronounced). Young Englishmen, hitherto slack and aimless, stood up and saluted Fascist fashion and took on something of the stiff, stern dignity of Roman *camerieri* as they did so.

"And who is he?" cried a penetrating voice.

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"What is his name? He is our leader. Our Deuce! We will follow him."

"Doochy!" someone corrected. . . .

Cries and confusion, and then out of it all the words, "Duty Paramount! The Master Paramount! Paramount!" growing to a great shout, a vast vocal upheaval.

"Hands up for adhesions," bawled a tall, intensely excited man at the Master Spirit's elbow, and the whole multitude was a ripe cornfield of hands. It was an astounding gathering; young men and old men, beautiful women, tall girls like flames and excited elderly persons of every size and shape, all fused in one stupendous enthusiasm, and many of them waving sticks and umbrellas. Never had there been a religious revival to compare with it. And every eye in all that swaying mass was fixed on the serene determination of the Master Spirit's face.

Flashes of blinding lavender-tinted light showed that press cameras were in action.

"Turn this place into a headquarters. Enrol them," said the Master Spirit.

He felt a tug at his sleeve. It was the first of a number of queer little backward tugs he was to feel even in the first exaltation of his ascent. "We've only got the place until midnight," said a thin, unnecessary, officious-mannered little man.

"Disregard that," said the Master Spirit and prepared to leave the auditorium.

"They'll turn us out," the little man insisted.

"Turn *that* out! *Never!*" said the Master

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Spirit, waving a hand to the following he had created, the stormy forces he had evoked, and scorched the doubter with his blazing eyes. But still the creature insisted.

“Well, they’ll cut off the lights.”

“Seize the switches! And tell the organist not to play the National Anthem until he is told to. Tell him to play some stirring music as the enrolment goes on.”

The timid man shrunk away, and others more resolute obeyed the Master’s behests. “Turn us out” indeed! The organist after a brief parley arranged to play “O God Our Help in Ages Past,” with variations, wandering occasionally into “Onward, Christian Soldiers” and “Rule Britannia,” until a suitable relief could be found for him, and to such magnificent music it was that the League of Duty Paramount was born.

The enrolment continued until dawn. Thousands of names were taken. They poured past the little tables endlessly. Their eyes blazed, their noses resembled the first Duke of Wellington’s, their chins protruded more and more. It was amazing that the Albert Hall could have held so many earnest and vigorous people. . . .

The Master’s task for that evening was done. He had fought his first fight on the road to power. Reverential hands guided him down steps of faded baize. He found himself in a little ante-room, and Hereward Jackson was offering him a glass of water. The chairman of the meeting stood out at the centre of a select circle of devotees. Mrs.

Pinchot, dark and mutely worshipping, had managed somehow to get into this inner grouping. Her eyes were full of understanding. "Too late for the morning papers," said the chairman, "but we shall see that the evening press gets everything full and good. A wonderful speech, sir! Do you mind a few photographers from the picture papers taking shots at you?"

"Let them," said the Master Spirit.

He considered. "I am to be seen at Carfex House. I shall make that my headquarters. Let them come to me there."

For a moment that rare smile of his dazzled the chairman, touched Mrs. Pinchot like a glancing sunbeam, and he had gone.

"Not tired, sir?" asked Hereward Jackson anxiously in the car.

"It is not for me to be tired," said the Master Spirit.

"I have an excellent tonic I can give you at Carfex House," said Sir Titus.

"Chemicals when I must," said the Master, with that characteristic gesture of his hand.

Yet he was sensible of fatigue and oddly enough of just one faint twinge of anxiety. There was one little speck upon the splendour of this triumph. These two men were manifestly faithful, and Jackson was full of emotion at the immense success of the meeting, but—there ought to have been a third man in the car.

"By the by," said the Master Spirit, leaning back restfully in the big Rolls-Royce and closing

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his eyes with an affectation of complete indifference. "Where is Sir Bussy Woodcock?"

Jackson thought. "He went away. He went quite early. He got up suddenly and went out."

"Did he say anything?"

"Something—it always sounds like 'Gaw.'"

The Master Spirit opened his eyes. "He must be sent for—if he is not at Carfex House. I shall want him at hand."

But Sir Bussy was not at Carfex House. He had not gone home. The place, however, was entirely at the disposal of the Master Spirit and his retinue. The servants had everything in readiness for them, and the major domo offered to telephone to Mar-mion House to restore communications with Sir Bussy. But if there was a reply it did not get through to the Master Spirit, and next morning Sir Bussy was still missing. He did not reappear until late the next afternoon and then he drifted into his own property, the most detached and observant person in what was rapidly becoming a busy and militant hive. The organization of the staff of the Master Spirit and the apportionment of rooms to the secretaries he engaged, had gone on rapidly in the absence of the legal owner of the house. Among the secretaries, most energetic and capable of helpers, was little Mrs. Pinchot, the medium. Others were chosen from among the little Oxford group of "Parham's Young Men."

Next morning after a séance with a number of photographers, the Master Spirit motored to Harrow School, where as a result of headlong

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arrangements he was able to address the boys in the morning. His address was substantially the same as that he had given at the Albert Hall, and the enthusiasm of the generous youngsters, led by the more military masters, was a very glorious experience. While he lunched with the head, the gallant lads, neglecting all thought of food, bolted off to put on their cadet uniforms, and an informal parade of the corps was held to bid him farewell, with shouts of "Duty Paramount!" and "We are ready!"

There was little classroom work for the rest of that day at Harrow.

A strong contingent of reporters was present, and next morning saw the demonstration fully reported and pictured in all the daily papers. So his message came through to that greater outer world, the general public, and awakened an immediate response.

The following afternoon saw him repeating his triumph on the playing fields of Eton.

The time was ripe, and men had been waiting for him. In a few weeks the whole Empire knew of the Duty Paramount movement and the coming of the Master Paramount (the formal title of Lord Paramount came later) to lead England back into the paths she had forsaken. The main newspaper groups supported him from the outset; Lord Bothermeyer became his devoted standard bearer, and all the resources of modern journalism were exerted in his favour. He was urged in leading articles that would have been fulsome had they

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referred to any mere mortal leader, to conduct his manifest mission of control and suppression fearlessly and speedily. His popularity with the army, navy, and flying corps, and particularly with the very old and very young officers in these services, was instantaneous and complete. Literature cast off the triviality and scepticism that had overtaken it and flamed to his support. Mr. Bloodred Hipkin, the Laureate of Empire, burst into his swan song at his coming and Mr. Berandine Shore, overjoyed at the fall of the entire detestable race of politicians, inundated the press with open letters to proclaim him even greater than Mussolini. He was cheered for twenty minutes at the Stock Exchange. The feminine electorate was conquered *en masse* by the Byronic beauty of his profile, the elegance of his gestures, and the extraordinary charm of his smile.

England fell into his hands like a ripe fruit. It was clear that the executive and legislative functions were his for the taking.