

CHAPTER V

THE LORD PARAMOUNT STUDIES HIS WEAPONS

THERE were moments even in the opening phase of this great adventure of the Lord Paramount when it was difficult for him to believe himself true, but his sense of duty to those he was lifting out of their ten-year post-war lethargy made him conceal these instants—for they were no more than instants—of weakness from everyone about him, even from the faithful and sustaining Mrs. Pinchot and the indefatigable Hereward Jackson. His ordinary state of mind was one of profound, of almost exultant admiration for his own new vigour of purpose and action. He knew that his ascendancy meant a march towards war, war on a vaster and handsomer scale than had ever yet illuminated the page of history. This might have dismayed a lesser soul. But he knew himself the successor of Napoleon and Cæsar and Alexander and Sargon, adequate to the task before him. And he knew what history demands of great nations. His mission was to make history and to make it larger and heavier with a greater displacement of the fluidities of life than it had ever been made before.

As he made it he wrote it in his mind. He saw his own record, the story of his war, towering up at the end of the great series of autobiographic war

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histories from Thucydides to Colonel Lawrence and Winston Churchill. *Parham De Bello Asiatico*. That he would do in the golden days of rest, after the victory. It was pleasant to anticipate those crowning literary hours amidst the stresses of present things. He would find himself making character sketches of himself and telling in the third person of his acts and decisions in the recognized style of such records.

It was queer at times how strongly his anticipations of this record imposed themselves upon his mind. There were phases and moments when he did not so much seem to be doing and experiencing things as relating them to himself.

It was manifest that among the most urgent of his duties was the rapid acquisition of a broad and exact knowledge of the equipment and possibilities of the armed forces of the Empire. Of these he had now to be the directive head, the supreme commander. On him would fall the ultimate responsibility in the day of battle. Other men might advise him, but it was he who must control, and who can control without adequate knowledge? Lucky for him that his mind was as swift as an eagle and that he could grasp the import of a scheme while lesser intelligences still struggled with its preliminary details.

He sought among ex-war ministers, sea lords, and high permanent officials in the combatant departments, for informants and experts with whom he could work. It was profoundly important to know and take the measure of all such men. And

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they had to know him, they had to experience his personal magnetism and be quick to understand and ready to obey him. At first there was some difficulty in getting the right tone. In all the fighting services there is an habitual distrust of politicians, an ingrained disposition to humbug and hoodwink interfering civilians, and this tradition of reserve was sufficiently strong to retard their first surrender to the Lord Paramount's charm and energy, for some time.

Moreover, there were many restraints and reservations between different sections of the services that were hard to overcome. Most of these men betrayed not only the enthusiasm but the narrowness of the specialist's concentrated mind. Air experts ridiculed battleships; naval men showed a quiet contempt for the air; gas was a sore subject with nearly everybody; gunners considered everything else subsidiary to well-directed gunfire, and the tank people despised sea, air, gunfire, and chemical warfare in nearly equal proportions. "We go through," was their refrain. There were even men who held that the spearhead of warfare was propaganda and that the end to which all other operations must be directed was the production of a certain state of mind (variously defined and described) in the enemy government and population. The Empire was, in fact, partially prepared for every conceivable sort of warfare with every conceivable and many inconceivable antagonists, and apart from a common contempt for pacifists as "damned fools" and for cosmopolitans as

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dreamers and scoundrels, its defenders did not as yet possess an idea in common to ensure their co-operation when the moment of conflict came.

Such were the fruits of our all too copious modern inventiveness and our all too destructive criticism of simple political issues. Such were the consequences of a disputatious parliamentary system and the lack of any single dominating will. The navy was experimenting with big submarines and little submarines, with submarines that carried aircraft inside them and submarines that could come out on land and even climb cliffs, with aircraft carriers and smoke screens, and new types of cruiser; the gunners were experimenting; the army was having a delightful time with tanks, little tanks and big tanks, hideous and ridiculous and frightful and stupendous tanks, tanks that were convertible at a pinch into barges, and tanks that would suddenly expand wings and make long flying hops, and tanks that became field kitchens and bathrooms; the air force killed its two young men or more a week with patient regularity, elaborating incredible stunts; Gas Warfare was experimenting; each was going its own way irrespective of the others, each was doing its best to crab the others. The Lord Paramount went hither and thither, inspecting contrivances that their promoters declared to be marvellous and meeting a series of oldish young and youngish old men, soured by the fermentation of extravagant hopes.

Sir Bussy, an unwilling consultant upon many of these expeditions, found a phrase for them so lack-

ing in dignity that for a time it troubled the Lord Paramount's mind.

"Like a lot of damned schoolboys," said Sir Bussy, "mucking about with toy guns and chemical sets in an attic. Each one on his own—just as disconnected as he can be. With unlimited pocket money. What do they think they are up to? What do they think it is for—all this damned militarism? They don't know. They lost connection long ago, and there they are. They'll just set the place on fire. What else do you expect of them?"

The Lord Paramount made no reply, but his swift mind tackled the challenge. He was capable of learning, even from an enemy.

"Lost connection," that was the illuminating phrase.

Disconnected—that was the word. Because they had had no one and no great idea to marshal them in order and unify their efforts. They were the scattered parts of a great war machine which had quietly disarticulated itself after 1918 and followed its divergent traditions and instincts, and it was for him to assemble them into co-operation again. After that remark of Sir Bussy's he knew exactly what to say to these forgotten and un-honoured experts. He knew the one thing of which they stood in need: Connection. To everyone he spoke of the nature of the campaign ahead and of the particular part to be played in it.

That was the magic touch for which they had been waiting. It was wonderful how these sorely neglected men brightened at his words. He made

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them see—Russia; he projected the minds of the airmen towards mighty raids amidst the mountains of central Asia and over the dark plains of eastern Europe; he lit the eyes of the special underseas services with the words “a relentless blockade”; he asked the mechanized soldiers how they would go over steppes and reminded them darkly of the prophetic fact that the first writing on the pioneer tank had been in Russian. To the naval men he spoke also of another task. “While we do our work in the Old World, you are the sure shield between us and the follies of the New.”

Yes, that meant America, but the word ‘America’ was never said. America which might do anything, which might even go “modern” and break with history—even her own brief and limited history. The fewer years she was given to think before the crisis came, the better for the traditions of our old world.

Many of these brave, ingenious men to whom the Lord Paramount came were sick at heart with hope deferred. Year by year they had invented, contrived, and organized, and still the peace held. There were breezes, but these died away. These workers in the obscurity read pacifist articles in the newspapers; they heard continually of a League of Nations that was to make a futility of all the dear lethal inventions they had given the best of their years to perfect. A clamour for economies, the bitter ingratitude of retrenchment, threatened them. He brought new life and hope to their despondent souls.

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From amidst the miscellany of experts and officials the figure of a certain General Gerson emerged gradually to a sort of pre-eminence. He emerged by a kind of innate necessity. He seemed to know more than the others and to have a more exhaustive knowledge. He had a genius for comprehensive war plans. There was something quintessential about him, as though he concentrated all that Mr. Parham had ever read, seen, thought, or felt about soldiers. Undeniably he had force. He was the man to whom it became more and more natural to turn in any doubtful matter. He was presently almost officially the Lord Paramount's right hand in military things. It was not that the Lord Paramount chose him so much as that he arrived. He became the embodiment of the material side of power. He was the sword—or shall we say the hand grenade?—to the Lord Paramount's guiding brain and will. He was his necessary complement. He translated imperial vision into practical reality.

He was not exactly a prepossessing person. His solid worth had to be discovered without extraneous aid. He was sturdily built, short and rather thick set, with exceptionally long, large, and hairy hands. His head was small and bomb-shaped and covered with a wiry fuzz. His nose was short but not insignificant, a concentrated, wilful nose. His mouth was large, vituperative in form when open, and accustomed to shut with emphasis. Generally he kept it shut. His bristling moustache was a concession to military tradition rather than an orna-

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ment, and his yellow skin was blue spotted as the result of an accident with some new explosive powder. One eye, because of that same accident, was of glass: it maintained an expression of implacable will, while its fellow, alert and bright brown, gathered information. His eyebrows were the fierce little brothers of his moustache. He wore uniform whenever he could, for he despised "mufti men," but also he despised the splendours of full uniform. He liked to be a little soiled. He liked common and rather dirty food eaten standing, with the fingers instead of forks, and he resorted to harsh and violent exercises to keep fit.

His fitness was amazing, a fierce fitness. "In this world," he said, "the fittest survive." But he despised the mawkish games of feebler men. In the country, when he could, he cut down trees with great swiftness and animosity; or he pursued and threw over astonished and over-domesticated cows, rodeo-fashion. In towns, he would climb swiftly up the backs of high houses and down again, or box, or work an electric drill and excavate and repave back yards. The electric drill bucked up the neighbours tremendously and created a hostile audience that was of use in checking any tendency to slack off. On such occasions he dressed lightly and exposed and ventilated an impressive breadth of hairy chest.

The Lord Paramount was more and more compelled by the logic of his own undertakings to respect and defer to this heroic associate as time went on, but he would not have looked like him

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for the lordship of a dozen worlds.

From the first the advice of General Gerson had something of the dictatorial.

“You ought to do so and so,” he would say and add compactly, “they expect it of you.” And the Lord Paramount would realize that that was so.

It was, for example, borne in upon him through something in the bearing and tone of General Gerson that it behoved him to display a certain temerity in his attitude to the various new, ingenious, and frightful things that were being accumulated to ensure the peace of the Empire. It was not in the nature of the Lord Paramount to shrink from personal danger, but he might have been disposed to husband his time and nervous energy in regard to those things, if it had not been for Gerson's influence. Gerson was hard. And a ruler who rules Gerson must be hard also. A certain hardness is a necessary part of greatness. Good to be reminded of that. At times he found himself sustaining his own determination by talking to himself in quite the old Parham fashion. “I owe it to myself,” he said. “I owe it to the world.”

So he looped the loop over London, holding tight and keeping his face still and calm. He wore strange and dreadful-looking gas masks and went into chambers of vaporous abomination, where instant death would have been the result of a pin prick to his nozzle. It was a pity his intrepid face was so disguised, for it would have been well for weaker-spirited men to mark its observant calm. Rather reluctantly he had to see a considerable

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number of cats, sheep, and dogs demoralized and killed by poison gas, the precious secret of General Gerson's department, that Gas L of which Camel-ford had spoken, for which no antidote was known. It seemed to hurt damnable in the two or three minutes before the final collapse. Unless all forms of animal expression are a lie, it was death by intolerable torture. "I owe it," he repeated, for there was mercy in his nature.

"This gas we do not use," he said firmly, "except as an ultimate resort."

"War," said Gerson, sighing contentedly as the last victim ceased to writhe, "war *is* an ultimate resort."

The Lord Paramount made no answer because he felt he might be sick. He seemed to have Mr. Parham's stomach, and very often in those feats of hardihood he had occasion to feel sick. He spent some chilly and clammy hours at the bottom of the Solent, and he raced at twenty miles an hour in a leaping, bumping tank across the rough of Liss Forest, and both occasions tested him out. He wore *boules quiés* and fired immense chest-flattening guns by touching a button, and he was wetted to the skin and made sickest of all by tearing down the Channel against a stiff south-wester at forty miles an hour in a new mystery boat that was three parts giant torpedo.

"It was the lot of Nelson too," he said, coming ashore greenly triumphant but empty to the depths of his being. "His heart kept in the right place even if his stomach betrayed him. . . ."