

CHAPTER VI

THE LOGIC OF WAR

SEVERAL times did the Lord Paramount return to the topic of poison gas with Gerson. He did not want it to be used, but at the same time the logic of war made him anxious to be sure of an effective supply. Camelford's threat of holding it up haunted him with a very tiresome persistence. And Gerson had been a poison gas expert.

The Lord Paramount wanted war to be magnificent. Wars are the red letters that illuminate the page of history. The resolute tramp of infantry, the inspiring jingle and clatter of cavalry, the mounting thunder of the guns; that was the music to which history had gone since history was worthy of being called history, and he wished that the old tunes could still be played and history still march to them. Some of these new machines and new methods, he perceived, had the hardness and intolerance of a scientific thesis; they despiritualized warfare, they made it indiscriminate; almost they abolished heroism in favour of ingenuity and persistence, these scientific virtues. At the climax men would be just carried forward willy-nilly. He would gladly have subscribed to any common understanding to eliminate the aeroplane, the submarine, and all gas from civilized hostilities, as

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

bacteria and explosive bullets have already been eliminated. But Gerson would have none of these exclusions. "War is war," said he, "and what kills and breaks the spirit best is what you have to use."

"But the bombing of towns! Poison gas on civilians. Poison gas almost haphazard."

"What right have they to be civilians?" said Gerson.

"Probably shirking a levy or something. In the next war there won't be any civilians. Gas doesn't have a fair deal. Everyone's against it. Ask me, I should say it improves fighting. Robs them of the idea there's something safe behind them. How's the old nigger song go? Bombs—

*'Kicking up ahind and afore
And a yaller gas aspreading out ahind old Joe'*

Turns 'em back to it."

"Practically—at Geneva we have undertaken not to use gas."

"Query—the 'practically.' 'Fit comes to that, we've renounced the use of war—by the Kellogg Pact and such-like flummery. Doesn't prevent every Power in Europe, and Washington too, keeping its Poison Gas Department up to strength and working overtime. No—sir. For propaganda purposes you may begin a war gentlemanly and elegant, but wait till the game warms up! Then you gouge. Then you bite off noses. And the gas comes in—trust me."

THE LOGIC OF WAR

"Yes," said the Lord Paramount, yielding. "Yes. It's true. To impose a decision one must be stern."

He composed himself for some moments as an image of implacable sternness.

The expression in the eye of General Gerson was no doubt reluctant respect.

"And now for the most probable campaigns," began the Lord Paramount, and stirred the maps that lay upon the table before them. "First—Russia."

"Things might very well begin there," said Gerson.

For a time they discussed the possibilities arising out of a clash with Moscow. "In that event," said Gerson, "if nothing occurs in nearer Europe, we would have to run a sort of second-rate war. As we did in Palestine with Allenby. For a time, anyhow. The new things are for closer populations. We can't send a lot of ultra-modern stuff out there. Aeroplanes with machine guns—in sufficient abundance, of course—ought to settle anything that we're likely to have against us in India or Central Asia. Central Asia has always fallen back on nomadism hitherto, cavalry swarms, Parthians, Huns, Mongols, and so on. But that game's up, against aeroplanes and machine guns. The wing will beat the horse. New chapter of history. And the Afghan game of sitting among rocks and sniping at you goes the same way. The bird comes down on him. Every sort of what I might call barbaric and savage warfare is over

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

now—twenty years out of date. We've got 'em. Russia in Asia would be a comparatively easy war. But we can't count on restricting it to Asia."

"I hope to do so."

"Hope, yes—I said, 'count on it.' And besides, there's Petersburg—what they *will* call Lenin-grad—and a little raid from that as a base to Moscow, just to settle things. We may be forced to do that. We might fight in Central Asia for ten years and settle nothing. . . . And who knows? If things get difficult with us—our friends in Berlin . . . Or even nearer . . . You never know."

He scrutinized the Lord Paramount.

"It isn't safe," he said, making it plainer, "to lean over Europe and fight Russia."

"I do not think it will be like that," said the Lord Paramount.

"No. But it might be."

Gerson left that doubt to rankle.

"I don't care what agreements you make," he said, "not to use this or that. States that can keep such agreements aren't really at war at all. It's just sport, s'long as you have rules. War don't begin until law ends. It isn't necessary if any sort of agreement can be made and enforced. All this agreeing not to use gas." Gerson smiled and showed his black teeth and pointed his witticism—"well, it's gas and nothing else. The decisive factor in any first-class war now has to be gas delivered from the air. Work it out—it's as plain as daylight. It's the only way to decision. All

THE LOGIC OF WAR

modern war from now on will be a fight to be able to drop gas in quantity on the most crowded, sensitive nervous centre of the enemy. Then and then only will the other side give in. They *have* to give in. You go on gassing till they do. . . . What other idea of war can there be now?"

It was hard stuff, but the man was right. The thoughtful face of the Lord Paramount grew resolute.

"I admit the logic of it." The white hand clenched.

"I believe the Germans have the most powerful explosives in the world," said Gerson. "If we left it at that they'd be on top. They're still the ingenious devils they always were. The Republic didn't alter much—and now that's over for good, thank God. 'Ware their chemists, say I! All the same we, as it happens, just now, and God knows for how long, have absolutely the lead in poison gas. Ab-solutely. It happens so."

"I know," said the Lord Paramount. "Gas L."

He was secretly pleased to see Gerson's amazement. "But—who *told* you of that?"

The white hand waved the question aside. "I know, my dear Gerson," smiled the Lord Paramount. "I happen to know. Works at Cayme, eh?"

"Well, there you are! If we had a war in Europe now we could astonish the world. . . . Do you know *all* about Gas L?"

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

"I don't," said the Lord Paramount. "Tell me."

"*Well*," said Gerson, "well," and leant forward over his clenched fists on the table in a pose that was somehow suggestive of a cat with its forefeet tucked under it. He stuck his head on one side.

He gave information reluctantly and confusedly. He was not accustomed to give information to anyone. He was not accustomed to give anything to anyone. But gradually before the mind of the Lord Paramount the singularity of Gas L became plain.

This was the gas Camelford had spoken of at that dinner at Sir Bussy's which still haunted his mind. This was the unknown gas that needed the rare earths and basic substances that it seemed only Cayme in Cornwall could supply. Even at the time, that gas had touched Mr. Parham's imagination and set him speculating. "Don't the scientific men, the real scientific men know about it?" he asked. "The devil of all this scientific warfare is that science keeps no secrets, and there's always someone, in some other country, hard on your track. Look how we tackled the German gas on the western front. In a week or so."

"You're right, precisely," said Gerson, "and that is just why I'd like to get to business with Gas L before very long. Before it's blown upon. Before they've set men to think it out. It's true that Cayme *may* be the only source of the stuff, and in that case the British monopoly is

THE LOGIC OF WAR

assured. But are we safe?"

The Lord Paramount nodded. But he wanted more particulars.

The real poison it seemed was not Gas L, but Gas L combined with nearly a hundred times its volume of air. It was very compressible. You let a little sizzle out from its reservoir, it vaporized, expanded, and began to combine. "It hurts. You remember those cats in the experimental chamber," said Gerson. It didn't decompose for weeks. It drifted about and it was still distressful when it was diluted to the merest trace. All the London area could be devastated with a score of tons. And there was no anti-gas known. For all the other known war gases there were anti-gases. But Gas L you had to counter with an impervious mask, adherent at its edges, keeping your air respirable with a combined oxygen maker and carbon dioxide absorber slung under the arm. You had, in fact, to put your men in a sort of sub-aerial diver's helmet that it needed training to adjust. "Think of the moral effect of it," said Gerson. "Paris or Berlin, a dead city, dead from men to rats, and nobody daring to go in and clean it up. After such a sample the world would howl for peace at any price whatever."

The Lord Paramount saw it for a moment as in a vision. The Place de la Concorde—still. Paris without a sound. Stiff bodies crumpled by the last agony. . . .

He came back to Gerson with an effort.

"Plainly Cayme is the key position of our

defences," he said. His mind searched among the possibilities of the situation. "Why shouldn't we nationalize it right away?"

"Why not?" said Gerson and seemed to chew unpleasant things. He finished his chewing. "I will tell you why not.

"*We*," he said, "know how to make Gas L. We know that. But we don't know how to prepare those basal substances—which are peculiar. And we don't know how to separate those rare earths. That *they* know; they've got secret processes at Cayme. It's a question of linked processes. Probably no single man knows all of them properly. Unless it's Camelford. (Camelford again!) If we seize Cayme, if we make any trouble about Cayme, then, for one thing, we call the attention of foreign experts to what is going on. See?"

The Master Spirit and the Master General eyed each other comprehendingly.

"What exactly—*is* Cayme?"

"Cayme in Lyonesse," began Gerson.

"Lyonesse?" said the Lord Paramount softly. His mind went back to his youth, his ardent poetic but still classical and seemly youth, when Tennyson was still admired and the lost land of King Arthur cast a glamour on the Cornish coast. For a moment or so he could have imagined he was dreaming, so strong was the flavour of unreality the magic name threw over the story. Then distant Lyonesse and Avalon sleeping under the sunset gave place to the blotched and formidable visage of Gerson again.

THE LOGIC OF WAR

"It's the new works the Star and Rocket Research Combine have made. It's a sort of joint subsidiary. Romer Steinhart & Co. Camelford. Some American capital. But Woodcock's the moving spirit on the business side. He's become a sort of alter ego of Camelford. Camelford's just taken hold of him and got him. He's a devil of a buyer and cornerer. They're up to something big together. God knows what goes on there! But it isn't Gas L. They're up to something of their own. Some revolution in dyes or films or artificial this, that, or the other. That's what *they* want the stuff for. Cheap films in schools or some such foolery. Think of it! Wasting our gas for the sake of kids in schools! They dole us out the material for our own gas, just as they think proper. At any price they like. And make a favour of it."

The mind of the Lord Paramount returned to the point that had held it up some moments before.

"Lyonesse? But *why* Lyonesse?"

"You don't know? I admit it's been done very quietly. They don't want to advertise it. Two or three square miles of ground brought up out of the sea, down by the village of Cayme and out towards Land's End. The stuff is out there. The works are supposed to be at Cayme, but really they're out beyond low water mark, that was. And there's some old poem or legend or something. . . ."

"So it really is Lyonesse!"

"That's what they call it."

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

"They've built up a place from the sea bottom?"

"No! They've raised the sea bottom and built a place on it. Something between a gas works and a battleship."

"But how——! Raised the sea bottom?"

"God knows how they did it. There it is. Raised. Mineral veins and all. And while we're at peace we can't raid 'em, we can't search 'em, we can't seize 'em. We can't get at them. That's the one flaw in our military situation. The weak point is the merchant at home. I always said it would be. People say the workers will give trouble. Workers, damn them! never give trouble unless someone eggs them on. They're all as patriotic as I am, really. They're human. They hate foreigners until their minds get spoilt. Strike at the eggers-on, say I, and the workers are yours for the drilling. But there's no national love or loyalty between business men and soldiering. Not the big business men. I mean the big world-wide traders. Of course, we've got so-called nationalist motor-car men and nationalist brands of this and that, but even the men with a straight Union Jack on car or can will hold us up if possible. Still, at the worst, they can be bought. There's something to be said for an army with an all-British equipment out and out. Battles won on Empire food and all that. But it isn't that sort of chap I mean. I mean the men who handle the broad products. This new sort. These new Big Civilians. Who think of the industry before they think of the flag.

THE LOGIC OF WAR

Who're getting outrageous ideas. It was a *bit* like this once or twice in the Great War: they objected to waste, but whatever is going on now is ever so much bigger. What is going on now is fundamental. These people are cornering Victory. That's what it comes to. Making a corner in Victory. Much they care for the Empire! I'm under no illusions. If the Empire wants Victory next time, the Empire has got to pay for it, and there's times when I think that it won't get it even if it pays. Suppose they hold it up *anyhow!*"

The Lord Paramount was thinking profoundly. The fine and regular teeth nibbled at the knuckles of the shapely hand. He had an idea. Meanwhile with the undertow of his mind he followed Gerson.

"There was a time," said Gerson, "when the man of science knew his place in the world. He kept his place just as the engineer on a battleship kept his place. You had to keep a sharp eye on finance always—finance being so largely Jews and international in spirit—but their women like titles and show and they're sort of silly with the women. And at bottom a Jew is always afraid of a soldier. But your man of science you could trust outright. You could—once. All you had to do with him was to slap him into uniform, give him temporary rank for the duration, and he got so fierce and patriotic he'd kill his mother to please you. And the business men too. They *loved* a belt and sword. They'd crawl for a bit of ribbon. The old sort of business man who went into shop or work-

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

shop at fourteen. Natural born patriots. They'd give the army anything it asked for. Once. Not now. All that has changed. This damned modern education, these new ideas, creep about everywhere. They're a sort of poison gas of the mind. They sap discipline. The young men of science, the clever ones, are all going Bolshy or worse. You'd be astonished. You can't count on them. It's extraordinary. And the business men and the bankers are rotten with pacificism. They get it out of the air. They get it from America. God knows how they get it! 'Does war *pay*?' they ask. Does war pay? Pretty question that! We get along now simply because the rich men are afraid of the Communists and the Communists won't have any truck with a rich man. The poor pacificist keeps the rich pacificist in order for us. But will that last? If ever that quarrel eases off and they look around them, you'll have the United States of Everywhere, and fleets and armies will be on the scrap heap and sojers in the casual ward. Look at the situation! About this gas. Here we are with the master gas of the world! Here we are, as we are. England's opportunity if ever there was opportunity. Go right out now and we win. And before we can take a firm line with anyone we have to ask ourselves: 'Shall we get our guns in time? Are we safe for high explosive? And in particular—will Mr. Camelford and Sir Bussy Woodcock please to kindly let us have our gas?' Gurr! When I think of it!"

Even great military experts must not be allowed

THE LOGIC OF WAR

to talk forever. The Lord Paramount sighed and drew himself up in a manner that conveyed the conference was at an end. He tapped the table between them and nodded and spoke reassuringly.

“When the time comes, *mon général*,” he said, “you shall have your gas.”

(And then again that momentary pang of doubt.)