CHAPTER IX

WAR WITH RUSSIA

THE results of the Lord Paramount's meteoric circlings in the European heavens would no doubt have become apparent in any event, very soon. But their development was forced on with a very maximum of swiftness by a series of incidents in Persia, Turkestan, Afghanistan, and along the northwest frontier of India.

For such a crisis the mind of the Lord Paramount was fully prepared. He could draw a map of Central Asia from memory and tell you the distance between all the chief strategic points. Fact was only assisting his plans. For a century it had been evident to every sound student of history, under the Soviet rule just as plainly as under the Czar, that the whole welfare and happiness of Russia depended upon access to the sea. From the days of Peter the Great to those of the enlightened and penetrating Zinovieff, the tutors of the Russian intelligence had insisted upon the same idea. Dostoievsky had given it the quality of a mystical destiny. It was inconceivable to them that Russia could prosper, flourish, and be happy without owning territories that would give her a broad, uninterrupted, exclusive outlet upon the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Meriterranean.

The school of British thought that had produced Mr. Parham was entirely of that opinion, and for an industrious century the statecraft of Britain had schemed, negotiated, and fought with the utmost devotion for the strangulation of Russia. The vast areas of Russia in Europe and Asia could not be productive and prosperous without serious injury to the people in Great Britain. That was axiomatic. If Russia established herself upon the sea, Britain would be irrevocably injured. That there might be a way of trading the products and needs of that great territory in an entirely satisfactory manner without the conquest, assimilation, or stringent suppression of Turks, Persians, Armenians, Baluchis, Indians, Manchus, Chinese, and whoever else intervened, was equally preposterous to the realistic minds of Russia. It was one of those great questions of ascendancy out of which the shapes of history are woven.

Steadfastly, automatically, these two great political systems had worked out the logical consequences of their antagonism. The railway in Central Asia had been and remained primarily, a weapon in this war. The Russians pushed up their strategic railways from Askabad and Merv and Bokhara; the British replied with corresponding lines. Teheran and Kabul festered with abominable Russian spies and propagandists, scoundrels of the deepest dye, and with the active and high-minded agents Britain employed against them.

With the coming of the aeroplane the tension had tightened exceedingly. Over Meshed and

Herat buzzed the Russians and the British, like wasps who might at any time sting.

This was the situation with which the Lord Paramount had to deal. He meant to force a decision now while the new regime in Russia was still weak and comparatively unprepared. Although the anti-British propaganda of the Russians was extraordinarily effective—"anti-imperialist" they called it—there was every reason to believe that their military discipline, munitions, and transport preparations in Uskub and Turkomania were still far below the Czarist level.

The crisis was precipitated by an opportune British aviator who nose-dived in flames into the bazaar at Kushk and killed and cooked several people as well as himself. A violent anti-British riot ensued. Bolshevik propaganda had trained these people for such excesses. A British flag was discovered and duly insulted, and shots were fired at two colleagues of the fallen airman who circled low to ascertain his fate.

The news, in an illuminated form, was at once communicated to the press of the world, and the Lord Paramount dictated a spirited communication to Moscow that followed the best precedents of Lord Curzon.

The Russian reply was impolite. It declared that British aeroplanes had no business over the Turkoman Soviet republic. It reiterated charges of sustained hostility and malignity against the British government since the fall of the Kerensky régime. It enlarged upon the pacific intentions

and acts of Soviet Russia and the constant provocation to which it had been subjected. It refused point-blank to make any apology or offer any compensation.

The Lord Paramount communicated this ungracious and insolent reply to the Powers, with an appeal for their sympathy. He announced at the same time that as a consequence of this culminating offence a state of war now existed between the United Soviet Republics and the British Empire. Neutral Powers would observe the customary restraints toward belligerents.

Herat and Kandahar were promptly occupied by Russian and British troops respectively, as precautionary measures, and a powerful British air force, supporting a raid of friendly Kurds, took and sacked Meshed. Herat was bombed by the British simultaneously with the far less effective bombing of Kandahar by the Russians. Although only high explosives and incendiary bombs were used in both cases, the Afghan population of these two towns, oblivious to the gigantic urgencies of the situation, displayed the liveliest resentment against Britain. This was manifestly unfair. This was clearly the result of an unscrupulous propaganda. They might perhaps be allowed a certain resentment for Herat, but it was Soviet bombs which burst in Kandahar.

The Lord Paramount had succeeded in doing what even Mr. Brimstone Burchell had failed to do. He had got his war with Russia—and Afghanistan thrown in.

The day following the declaration of hostilities, the British and Japanese, acting in strict accordance with a secret agreement already concluded through the foresight of the Lord Paramount, proclaimed the Chinese Kuomintang as an ally of Russia, published documents alleged to have been stolen by trustworthy agents from Russian and Chinese representatives in proof of this statement, and announced the blockade of China. The Japanese also landed very considerable forces to protect the strategic points in the railway system of eastern China from anything that might threaten them.

The British people, always a little slow at the uptake, took a day or so to realize that another World War was beginning. At first the hostilities seemed to be all Asia way, and merely spectacular for the common man. The music halls were laughing rather cynically at this return to war, but in quite a patriotic and anti-Bolshevik key. It was a joke against peace talk, which has always been rather boring talk to the brighter sort of people. The Lord Protector considered it advisable to create a press control bureau to make it perfectly clear to the public what was to be thought and felt about the conflict. True, there was none of the swift patriotic response that had made England the envy of the world in 1914, but unemployment was rife, and the recruiting figures were sufficiently satisfactory to preclude an immediate resort to conscription. Anti-Russian propaganda could be developed gradually, and enthusiasm could be

fanned as it was required.

He issued a general order to commanding officers everywhere: "A cheerful activity is to be maintained. Everyone on the move briskly. Every flag flying and every band busy. This is to be a bright and hopeful war. A refreshing war."

The instant fall in the numbers of the unemployed was featured conspicuously in all the papers.