

CHAPTER X

AMERICA OBJECTS

BUT now, after these confident beginnings, came a pause for thought. So far he had been doing his best to leave America out of the reckoning. He had counted on a certain excitement and discontent over there. His concerted action with Japan, and particularly the revelation of a secret understanding with Tokio, was, he knew, bound to produce irritation. But he was now to realize the extreme sensitiveness of American opinion, not only to any appearance of interference with American shipping, but also to any tampering with American interests in China and eastern Siberia. And he was to realize reluctantly how alien to British ideas American thought has become.

He was suddenly and strenuously visited by the new American ambassador. Abruptly on the heel of a telephone message at one o'clock in the morning the American ambassador came.

Through some conspiracy of accidents the Lord Paramount had not yet met the American ambassador. Mr. Rufus Chanson had been in France, where his wife had been undergoing an operation. Now he had come back post-haste, and a communication from Washington had brought him

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

headlong to the Lord Paramount in the small hours.

His appearance recalled at once a certain Mr. Hamp, a banker whom Mr. Parham had met at that memorable dinner at Sir Bussy's. He had the same rather greyish complexion, the same spectacles; he stooped in the same way, and he spoke with the same deliberation. If he had not been Mr. Rufus Chanson, he would certainly have been Mr. Hamp.

He was received in the War Office room that had now become the Lord Paramount's home. He was ushered in almost furtively by an under secretary. Mrs. Pinchot, with whom the Lord Paramount had been relaxing his mind, sat in one corner throughout the interview watching her master with dark adoring eyes.

"My lord!" said Mr. Chanson, advancing without a greeting. "What does this mean? What does it all mean? I've hardly kept touch. I got papers on board the boat, and my secretary met me at Dover. I'm thunder-struck. What have you been doing? Why have I got this?" He waved an open document in his hand.

The Lord Paramount was surprised by his visitor's extreme agitation, but remained calm. "Mr. Chanson, I believe," he said and offered his hand and motioned to a chair. "May I ask what is the matter?"

"Don't say you've been deliberately interfering with American shipping at Tientsin," implored Mr. Chanson. "After all that has passed. Don't

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say you've seized five ships. Don't say that it's by your orders the *Beauty of Narragansett* was fired on and sunk with seven men. As things are, if that is so—God knows what our people won't do!"

"There is a blockade."

The American appealed to heaven. "Why in the name of Holiness, is there a blockade?"

"There has been some incident," the Lord Paramount admitted. He turned to Mrs. Pinchot, who rustled with her papers. Her little clear voice confirmed, "*Beauty of Narragansett* refused to obey signals and sunk. Number of drowned not stated."

"My God!" said Mr. Chanson. "Will you British people never understand that in the American people you're dealing with the most excitable people on God's earth? Why did you let it happen? You're asking for it."

"I don't understand," said the Lord Paramount calmly.

"Oh, God! He doesn't understand! The most sensitive, the most childish, the most intelligent and resolute of nations! And he outrages their one darling idea, the Freedom of the Seas, and he sinks one of their ships and seven of their citizens as though they were so many Hindoos!"

The Lord Paramount regarded the scolding, familiar-mannered figure and contrasted it with any possible European diplomatist. Surely the Americans were the strangest of all strangers. And yet so close to us. It was exactly like being scolded

by a brother or an intimate schoolfellow, all seemliness forgotten.

"We gave notice of our intention. We were within our rights."

"I'm not here to argue points. What are we going to do about it? Couldn't you have given way just on that particular thing? I can't help myself, I have to give you this dispatch."

He didn't offer to give it. He seemed indeed to cling to it.

"Listen to me, my Lord Paramount," he said. "The President is a man of Peace; He's God's own man of Peace; but remember also he's the spokesman of the American people and he has to speak as their representative. This dispatch, sir, is going to the newspapers as we talk. It can't be held. Here it is. You may think it hectoring, but half the folks over there will say it isn't hectoring enough. The Freedom of the Seas! They're mad for it. Even the Middle West, which hasn't an idea what it means, is mad for it. Seizures! And sinking us! Never did I think, when I came to St. James's, I should have to deal with such a situation as this. . . . Everything so pleasant. The court. . . The kindly friends. And now this fierceness. . . . My wife, sir, over there has taken to her bed again. All the good Paris did her—undone!"

He put the paper on the table and wrung his liberated hands. He subsided into distressful mutterings.

The Lord Paramount took the dispatch and read

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it swiftly. His face grew pale and stern as he read. Dismay and indignation mingled in his mind. "Hectoring" was certainly the word for it. It made the historical Venezuela message seem a love letter. These Americans had never been adepts at understatement. Britain had to discontinue the blockade "forthwith"—a needless word—restore certain seized ships, compensate . . .

When he had finished reading he turned back a page, in order to gain time before he spoke. He was thinking very rapidly how the country would take this, how Canada would take it, how the Empire and the world would be affected. He was already very anxious about his proposed allies in Europe, for none had shown a decent promptitude in carrying out the terms of the understandings he had made with them. Germany, Poland, Yugo-Slavia, Italy had done nothing against Russia, had not even closed a frontier, and France, though she had partly mobilized, had made no clear intimation of her intentions and done nothing further in the way of cooperation. All of them seemed to be waiting—for some further cue. What was going to happen to these hesitating associates when they heard of this quarrel with America?

"My dear sir," he said. "My dear sir. In Britain we have always been willing to recognize the peculiar difficulties of American diplomacy. But this dispatch——!"

"Yeh!" said the American ambassador. "But don't think it's just talking."

"It goes too far. We know how urgent the

exigencies of party politics can be over there. But the embarrassment——! It is almost a habit with American statesmen to disregard every difficulty with which we may be struggling on this side. . . . I will try to take this patiently, this string of insults. But—— The President must have written it at fever heat.”

“Can’t you say that the shooting was a mistake? Hot-headed subordinates and all that?”

For a moment the Lord Paramount thought, and then, with a start and a glance at Mrs. Pinchot he exclaimed, “Good heavens! Go back on a man who obeys orders!”

“You’ll hold to it, it was by order?”

“A general order—yes.”

The American shrugged his shoulders and despaired visibly.

“I must consider the situation,” said the Lord Paramount. “Your President has put me in a very terrible position. I have come into public affairs to restore honour to human life. I have vowed myself to a high-spirited England. I have come to carry out great policies that will save all that is precious in Western civilization. I do not think that this public of yours in America dreams of the immense issues of this struggle that is now beginning. Nor your President. And while I gather together the forces of this great Empire for a world conflict, suddenly this petty affair is seized upon to distress, to complicate—I don’t know—possibly to humiliate. . . . What good, I ask you, can this hectoring do? What end can it serve?”

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"Yeh!" the American ambassador intervened. "But what I want you to understand, sir, is that this message isn't simply hectoring with an eye to the next election, and it isn't just to be set aside as tail-twisting the British lion. You'll get things all wrong if you try to see it like that. The American people are a childish people, perhaps, but they're large. They see things big. They have some broad ideas. Perhaps suddenly they'll grow up into something very fine. Even now they have a kind of rightness. And, rightly or wrongly, they have got this idea of the Freedom of the Seas as strongly now as they have the Monroe idea; they've got it and the President has got it; and if there isn't something done to put this in order, and if your people go seizing or shooting at any more of our ships, well—I'm not threatening you. I'm talking in sorrow and dismay—you'll get an ultimatum."

"My *dear* sir!" said the Lord Paramount, still resisting the unpleasant idea. "But an ultimatum means——"

"What I'm telling you. It means war, sir. It means something nobody on either side of the Atlantic has ever had the courage to figure out. . . ."