

CHAPTER III

OVERTURE IN THE AIR

“WE take the left wing in Belgium.”

It was an admission of failure; it was the acceptance of a new situation. In the original scheme for world warfare that the Lord Paramount had laid before the Council of the British Empire, he had dismissed the possibility of fighting in western Europe. He had seen his war east of the Vistula and Danube and with its main field in Asia. He had trusted unduly to the wisdom and breadth of view of both America and the European chancelleries. And consequently, in spite of a certain insistence from Gerson, he had troubled very little about the novel possibilities of air war at home. Now, hard upon the heels of the naval tragedy, came the new war in the air.

The land war on the European frontiers made little progress after the first French advance into Westphalia. The Franco-Italian front was strongly fortified on either side, and the numerous and varied mechanisms of the reconstituted British army had still to come into action. There had been some miscalculation about the transport needed to put them across the Channel. But every power now possessed huge air forces, and there was nothing to prevent their coming into action forth-

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with. The bombing of London, Paris, Hamburg, and Berlin with high explosives occurred almost simultaneously. The moon was just entering upon its second quarter; the weather all over the Northern Hemisphere was warm and serene, and everything favoured this offensive.

Night after night, for fifteen days, the air of Europe was filled with the whir of gigantic engines and the expectation of bursting bombs. The fighting planes kept each other busy; anti-aircraft guns were a disappointment, and all the great centres of population seethed with apprehensions and nervous distresses that might at any time explode in senseless panics. The early raiders used only high explosives. The conventions were observed. But everywhere there was a feeling that these explosive and incendiary raids were merely experimental preludes to the dreaded gas attacks.

There was a press agitation in London for "Gas masks for everyone" and a strong discussion of the possibilities of the use of "anti-gases." The London authorities issued exhortations to the people to keep calm, and all theatres, music halls, and cinemas were closed to prevent nocturnal congestions of the central districts. Millions of masks were issued, most of them of very slight efficiency, but they served to allay panic, and indeed no alleged precaution was too absurd for that purpose.

Gerson, looking ahead, removed as much as he could of the establishment of the government headquarters to a series of great gas-proof dugouts he had prepared at Barnet, but for a time the

THE AUTOCRACY OF MR. PARHAM

Master clung to his rooms in the War Office and would not resort to this concealment. Gerson protested in vain. "But," said the Lord Paramount, "Whitehall is Empire. To be driven underground in this fashion is already half defeat."

One night a rumour gained conviction as it spread until it became an absolute assurance, that gas was on its way and gas in monstrous quantities. There followed a reign of terror in the East End of London and a frantic exodus into Essex and the West End. The Germans used incendiary shells that night, and there were horrible scenes as the fire engines fought their way through the westward streaming crowds. Hundreds of cases of people who were crushed and trampled upon reached the hospitals, and the bombs and the fires accounted for thousands more.

The Lord Paramount was asked to visit the hospitals. "Can't the Royal Family do that?" he asked almost irritably, for he hated the spectacle of suffering. His heart quailed at the thought of that vista of possibly reproachful sufferers. And then, changing a tone which jarred even on his own sensibilities: "I will not seem to infringe upon the popularity of the reigning house. The people will rather see them than me, and I have my hands full—full!—my God, full to overflowing."

Mrs. Pinchot understood, she understood entirely, but the general public, which has no sense of the limitations of the time and energy of its leaders, interpreted this preoccupation with duty

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as an inhuman rather than superhuman characteristic and made its interpretation very plain and audible. It became clearer and clearer to the Lord Paramount that destiny had not marked him for a popular leader. He tried to steel his heart to that disappointment, but the pain was there. For his heart was as tender as it was great.

Gerson greeted the crescendo of the air attacks with unconcealed satisfaction.

"They're getting it in Paris worse than we are," he said. "Those German incendiary bombs are amazing, and nerves are all out. They're talking of reprisals on the population in Westphalia. Good! Rome got it too last night. It's this sort of thing the Italians can't stand. They feel too much. They may turn on Paramuzzi in a frenzy if we just keep on at them. But, trust me, nothing could be better to wake up our own people. They'll begin to snarl presently. The British bulldog hasn't begun to fight yet. Wait till its blood is up."

The ugly mouth closed with an appreciative snap.

"The only possible reply to these German incendiaries is Gas L. And the sooner we get to that the better. Then the world will see."