CHAPTER VI

CAYME IN LYONESSE

THE chauffeur stopped short at a word from Gerson. "Pull up by the wayside," directed the General, "and try and look like engine trouble."

He got out. "We will walk to the top of the hill. The fellow standing there against the sky is our scout. And over beyond is Cayme."

The Lord Paramount obeyed in silence.

They were perhaps a couple of hundred yards from the crest. The sun was setting, a white blaze, which rimmed the line of the hill with iridescence. For an instant the Lord Paramount glanced back at the bleakness of the Cornish landscape, coldly golden, and then turned to the ascent.

"We shall see very little until this damned sun is down," said Gerson. "But there is no hurry now."

"An air scout," said the Lord Paramount.

"Theirs. They keep it circling. And they have another out to sea. But the water is opaque enough, I hope, to hide our submarines. And besides, they keep pretty far out."

"We have submarines?"

"Five. Six we had. But one is lost. All the coast has been played hokey with. The sea bed's coming up. God knows how they've done it, but

they've raised scores of square miles. Heaved it up somehow. Our submarine must have hit a lump or barrier—which ought not to have been there. They've just made all this Lyonesse of theirs out of nothing—to save paying decent prices to decent landowners. They bore down through it and take out minerals—minerals we'd give our eyes to get—that were hidden under the bottom of the sea."

The Lord Paramount regarded the huge boss of stone to the right of them with a puzzled expression.

"I seem to remember this road—that rock that sticks up there and the way the road turns round it."

"It goes to Penzance. Or it did."

"That old disused tin mine we passed, that too seems familiar. Something odd about the double shaft. . . . I've never seen this coast since I was a young man. Then I tramped it with a knapsack. By Land's End and along here and so on to Tintagel."

"You'll find it changed in a moment."

The Lord Paramount made no answer.

"Now. We're getting into view. Stroll easily. That fellow up there may be watching us. The evening's as still and clear as crystal. No mist. Not a cloud. We could do with a little obscurity to-night."

"Why have we no aeroplanes up?"

Something like contempt sounded in Gerson's voice.

"Because we want to take your friends out there by surprise."

The Lord Paramount felt again that sense of insufficiency that had been troubling him so frequently during the last few days. He had asked a silly question. More and more was Gerson with his lucid technical capacity taking control of things. There was nothing more to be said, and in silence the Lord Paramount surveyed the view that had opened out before them. Gerson was still in control.

"We had better sit down on this bank among the heather. Don't stand still and stare. It won't do to seem even to be watching them."

The land was changed indeed.

Cayme was unlike any town, any factory, any normal place that Mr. Parham had ever seen. For it was Mr. Parham's eye that now regarded it. It sat up against the incandescent sky, broad, black, squat, like some monstrous new development of the battleship. It was a low, long battleship magnified by ten. Against the light it had no form nor detail, only a hard, long shape. Its vast shadow veiled a wedge of unassimilable detail, that might be a wilderness of streams and rich pools, in gloom and mystery. The land came out to this place, shining where it caught the light, or cut into blunt denticulations by long shadows, alternated triangles of darkness, wherever there was a rock or ridge to impede the light.

"But this was sea," said Mr. Parham.

"This was sea."

"And away there is still Land's End."

"Only it isn't Land's End any more. This runs right out."

"I came along here, I suppose, somewhere—hard now to say exactly where—and I had Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* in my knapsack. And I—I was a young man then—I looked across at the sunset—a great clear sunset like this one—and I dreamt of the lost cities and palaces of Lyonesse until almost I could see them, like a mirage, glittering under the sun."

"And Lyonesse is here, and it hasn't got any cities or palaces or knights. And it doesn't glitter. And instead of King Arthur and his Table Round, you've got a crew of Camelford's men, brewing God knows what treason.... I wish I knew.... I wish I knew."

Gerson sat in silence for a space, and then he talked again, almost as much to himself as to Mr. Parham.

"There they've got the stuff. They've got it; they've got everything. If we can wrench that place out of their hands suddenly—we have it all. I have men who can work it all right, given the stuff. Then we shall have poison gas to scare the world stiff. . . . And we'll scare them. . . . But swift and sure like the pounce of a cat—we must get them down before they can lift a finger. They'll blow the place to smithereens before they let us have it. Camelford has said as much. God knows what chemists are coming to! They didn't dare say 'No' to a soldier in the last Great War."

"These coasts have changed," said Mr. Parham, "and the world has changed. And it seems to me to-night as if God himself had changed to something strange and dreadful."

They sat in silence. The sun which had been a white blaze had sunk down until it touched the high line of the silhouette of Cayme, and its blinding glory had become only a blazing red disk.

"Tell me," said Mr. Parham. "What are our plans?"

Gerson glanced sideways to be sure the scout was out of earshot.

"We have all the Gas L the Empire could produce before these fellows collared the material. Just about enough for this job and no more. Further in some of it lies along the road, disguised as barrels of tar. Down in the village there, which used to be a fishing village and which now grows vegetables, keeps cows, and takes in washing for Cayme, it is piled up as barrels of beer. We have cases and cylinders hidden among the rocks."

"But where are our men?"

"At Bodmin, at Penzance, waiting for the dark with bicycles, and, oh!—there's a good lot about here, though you don't see them, hidden in ditches since last night, lying under heaps of dry heather, down in that wood we passed. Waiting for a noiseless rocket at one o'clock to-night. Each one ready for his job. Behind that first line is Burchell with men in every town from Plymouth to Exeter, all hanging about unobtrusively, ready to follow up. What a man he is! What energy! Like a boy,

an immense clever boy. He wouldn't let this happen without him. Would there were more like him!"

"And at one o'clock?"

"Quietly we shift the gas into the great ditch they have round that place, see our masks are adjusted, and let it loose."

"Which means?"

"They'll wriggle a bit—blast 'em!"

"And then?"

"No more of them. And at dawn we go in with our gas masks on—and take possession. Like digging out a wasp's nest."

"Suppose the gas doesn't work instantly—and they blow up in spite of us?"

"Then, my Lord Paramount, we are done. We'll go back to find London selling us, and selling us, the Union Jack with us, to anyone who cares to buy. We'll go back to find patriotism over and dead from China to Peru. We'll go back to find lords and dictators, ten a penny. Or—if we respect ourselves—we won't go back. But I think we can trust Gas L."

Never had the Lord Paramount felt so utterly Mr. Parham. He looked about him at that evening, and it was a golden dome of warmth and stillness in which it was very good to be alive, and far off he heard some late lambs bleating and crying to the deep answers of their mothers.

"It's quite possible the book of history will close with a bang," said Gerson; "quite possible. About one o'clock to-morrow morning. We've

done what we can. We've stuck like men to our own ideas. But, for instance, Gas L is faintly visible, a thin blue-grey vapour. At night it may get past them—but if they see it before they sniff it . . . Or if they have an anti-gas. . . ."

The General left the rest to Mr. Parham's imagination.

"Does he keep up all night?" asked Mr. Parham indicating the slowly circling plane by a movement of his head.

"There are reliefs. For all we know, we are spotted now. For all we know, every bit of our little scheme is known. For all we know, we're trying to kill a sleeping tiger with a pea shooter, and all we shall do is to wake it up."

A long silence. The ever broadening and ever reddening dome of the sun seemed to be pouring its molten substance slowly and steadily into the mysterious black receptacle of Cayme.

"How still it is!" whispered Mr. Parham.

"That's the damned thing about them," said Gerson, betraying a certain irritability. "*Still!* They never give a sign. These scientific men, these 'moderns,' as they call themselves, have never made a declaration or offered a deal a proper-minded man could consider. Only vague criticisms and pointless pacificism. Science has slipped out of our hands when we weren't looking. It used to be subservient enough. Years ago we ought to have forbidden scientific study or scientific knowledge except to men under military discipline, and we ought to have put our scientific discoverers under

the Official Secrets Act. Then we should have had them under control. And perhaps their damned progress wouldn't have gone on so fast. They'd have mumbled their rotten theories in a corner, and we could have treated them as a joke. And if we'd been more nippy about the traders and the moneylenders we could have kept them trading respectfully, as they used to do. But we let the scientific men and the industrialists and the bankers all run about and get notions just as they pleased, and here they are, out of control, a gang of cosmopolitan conspirators with the mask off, actually intercepting munitions that are vital to the Empire and treating for peace with enemy countries on their own account. It's kind of symbolical, sir, that we are here, conducting military operations by stealth, as it were—with even our uniforms planned to be invisible! . . . War ashamed of itself! . . . *Their* doing!"

And suddenly Gerson gave way to an outburst of the obscene, unmeaning blasphemies dear to simple souls the whole world over. He consigned men of science to the most unnatural experiences and the most unseemly behaviour. He raged against the vanity of intelligence and the vileness of mental presumption.

The last acutely bright red line of the sun's disk vanished abruptly from above the black crest of Cayme as though someone had suddenly thought of it and drawn it into the building. Minute cirrus clouds that had hitherto been invisible revealed themselves as faint streaks of gold

in the sky and slowly faded again. Mr. Parham remained sitting very still. General Gerson turned to the waiting scout with directions for him to get the rugs and hamper out of the car and send it on to Penzance. He and the Lord Paramount would wait here among the stones until it was time to begin the attack.

It seemed to Mr. Parham that the time passed very quickly before the attack began. An intense blue evening with a westward glow deepened through twilight into a starry night, which had fewest stars and a brighter edge to the north-west. He supped from the hamper and lay under a rock while Gerson, imitating and answering the sounds of improbable birds, made mysterious visits along the ridge and athwart the moor. Then when darkness came they started off, after much whispering and creeping about, blundering down the long slopes towards the erstwhile cliffs that marked the boundary of the old land and the new. Then a crawling forward with great circumspection and every possible precaution against noise. Then abruptly the startling discovery that he was not alone with Gerson, but one of a numerous line of furtive figures and groups, dimly visible against the sky line, some of them free handed and some bearing burthens.

Gerson handed Mr. Parham a gas mask. "Don't make any mistakes with it," he said. "It's Gas L. Get the edge *sucking* against your face."

An interval of waiting in which one heard one's heart beating, and then the noiseless rocket like a

meteor across the sky. Another interval for which there was no measure, and then the stealthy release of the Gas L.

The Gas L was plainly visible; it was as if it had a sort of grey luminosity. It crept along the ground and then slowly rose like swans' necks, like snakes, like the letter S, or like the top of a manuscript L, craning forward and down again towards the looming masses, now close at hand, of the mysteries of Cayme. It reached them and seemed to feel its way up their steep sides and slowly, slowly reached the crest of the walls and poured over. . . .

"At dawn we go in," said Gerson, his voice made Lilliputian by his mask. "At dawn we go in."

Mr. Parham shivered and made no reply.

He felt cramp for a time, he was tickled and worried by his mask about his ears, and perhaps he slept for, at any rate, the hours again passed very quickly, and almost abruptly the scene was warm with the sunrise. Seen closely and with the light of morning on them, the walls of Cayme were revealed as a hard greenish substance with a surface like dulled metal, and they rose, slanting backwards out of this ditch without any windows or loopholes, towards the sky. The ditch was unexpectedly deep; it made one a little giddy to come upon it suddenly, and in it there was no water at all and no bottom visible, but very far down something cloudy, a sort of heavy yellowish smoke that writhed and curled about and did not rise. One had to move cautiously and peer because of the

difficulty of seeing in a gas mask. One saw in a series of clipped pictures. The attack was lined out all along the edge of the ditch, a series of slouching cynocephali, with snouted white heads who turned about with cautious and noiseless movements and nosed and made gestures one to the other. Everyone carried a rifle or a revolver in his hand.

For a time the line was like a slack string along the edge of the ditch, uncertain of its next step. Then some common impulse had turned them all to the left, and they were following the edge of the ditch in Indian file as if to seek some point at which to cross it. The wall bent away presently and, rounding the bend, Mr. Parham came into view of a narrow drawbridge of open metal work, about the end of which a number of the assailants had halted in a cluster.

Leadership he realized was needed.

He found himself with Gerson at the foot of the drawbridge and the others standing as if awaiting a decision. At the far end of that slender strip of open iron-work was an open doorway without a door. It gave into the darkness of an unlit passage. The nothingness in that passage was extraordinary. Not a living thing was to be seen and not a sound broke the immense silence of Cayme. Mr. Parham wished that the word "mouse-trap" had not come into his head.

"Well?" came faintly from within Gerson's mask.

"If they are dead it is all right for us," said

Mr. Parham. "But if they are not dead, then it does not matter what we do, for even here we are completely in their power. One rifleman up there could pick us off one by one."

"Why did they leave that door open?" asked Gerson.

"I don't know. But I feel I have to go in."

"All or nothing," said Gerson.

He turned and gestured for six men to accompany them.

Mr. Parham in a state that was neither abject nor arrogant, a new Mr. Parham, puzzled and filled with wonder and dread, crossed the little bridge. He entered the passage. Gerson paused behind him to scrutinize the frame of the doorway. He made a comment that was inaudible. He looked up and dodged suddenly.

A door guided by grooves fell swiftly, stopped short with a metallic impact, and cut them off from the daylight and all support.

Gerson swore and tried to shove it up again. Mr. Parham saw the thing happen without astonishment and remained quite still. They were not in darkness. A few small electric lamps seemed to have been switched on by the falling door.