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Personal Recollection, by H. A. Jones**

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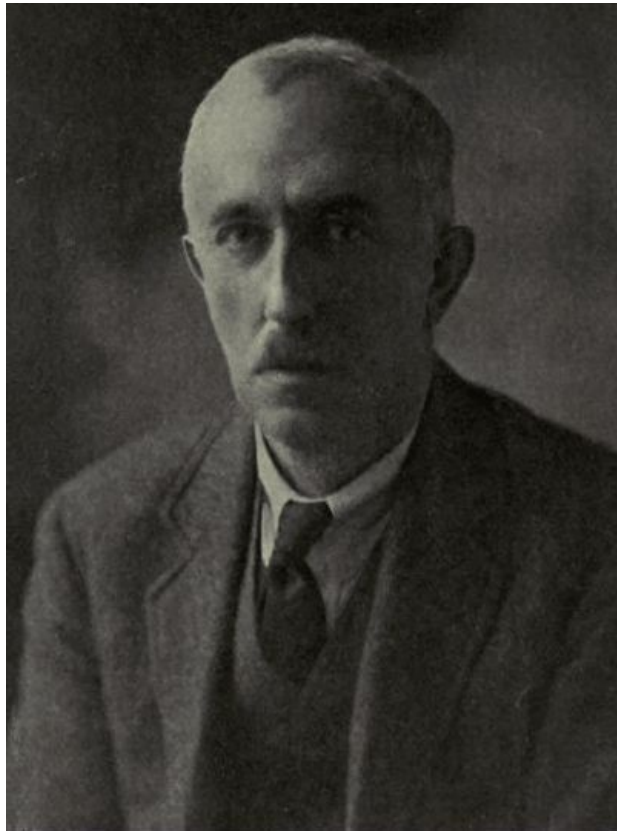
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A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION ***

**SIR WALTER RALEIGH
AND THE AIR HISTORY**



SIR WALTER RALEIGH

SIR WALTER RALEIGH AND THE AIR HISTORY

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

BY

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WITH PORTRAIT

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SIR WALTER RALEIGH AND THE AIR HISTORY

I

At a meeting of a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence which met in the middle of July, 1918, to consider the question of the official history of the Air Force, Admiral Slade welcomed Sir Walter Raleigh as the prospective author of a history which would be both interesting and unique—unique in the sense that no history of the kind had ever been written before. “Almost too good a chance,” was the interjection of Sir Walter.

Sir Walter took up the history with enthusiasm. At Oxford throughout the war he had been chafing under the inactivity which was imposed on him by his age. Oxford was empty of men. There was not even a lot of lecturing to do. The Air History gave him just such an opportunity as he loved. It was an adventure, and he looked upon life itself as an adventure. He was possessed of a fine imagination, and the story of the air had for him a great appeal. He had the heart of a boy. In a fine passage on the temper of the Air Force he says in his book:

“The recruits of the air were young, some of them no more than boys. Their training lasted only a few months. They put their home life behind them, or kept it only as a fortifying memory, and threw themselves with fervour and abandon into the work to be done. Pride in their squadron became a part of their religion. The demands made upon them, which, it might reasonably have been believed, were greater than human nature can endure, were taken by them as a matter of course; they fulfilled them, and went beyond. They were not a melancholy company; they had something of the lightness of the element in which they moved. Indeed, it would be difficult to find, in the world’s history, any body of fighters who, for sheer gaiety and zest, could hold a candle to them. They have opened up a new vista for their country and for mankind. Their story, if it could ever be fully and truly written, is the Epic of Youth.”

Sir Walter had something of the lightness of the element of which he wrote, otherwise he could never have written such a passage. He had seen the Air Force at work on active service. His month in France was a source of inspiration which produced some of the finest passages in his book. He went to France at a time when the victorious Allied armies were driving the Germans back towards the Rhine. His journey lasted from August the 14th to September the 8th, 1918. He spent a great part of his time at the Royal Air Force Headquarters, but also visited many squadrons and was taken over the numerous parks which ministered to the wants of the service. He flew about the Ypres salient, and other parts of the line. The story is told of him that whilst staying with one squadron he was already dressed in flying kit and on the point of starting as a passenger on a night bombing raid. He was stopped in time. I do not know whether the story is wholly true, but certainly he wrote home:

“I had the opportunity of going in a Handley Page on a night bombing raid, but had not the General’s permission, and as the pleasure would have been mine and the responsibility for any mishap would probably have fallen on the pilot, I felt bound to refuse. But I want to say that I think it important that I should see one of these raids from the air, and if I revisit France, I trust I may have leave to go.”

During his tour he was living in a world of new wonders. He was put to school to the air. All the mysteries that go to the making of the efficient fighting or reconnaissance machine were explained to him.

“I had the whole mystery of sound ranging explained and demonstrated to me, though if the art were lost, I doubt if I could superintend its recapture,” he says in a letter.

His visit was invaluable: it gave him perspective. Returned to England he went straightway to Oxford and started on the Introduction to his history. That Introduction in its final form is a beautiful piece of writing. But the writing of it did not come too easily. Sir Walter wrote with pain. The subject was new. The author was modest and conscientious. Nothing but his very best would satisfy him. Indeed he was seldom satisfied with what he wrote. “It goes heavy, so far, and I am destroying much of what I write,” he says in a letter written when he was finishing the Introduction. “False starts,” he goes on, “but it will get smoother soon.” And a few days later, “I am cobbling the Introduction; you shall have it by Monday morning.”

Statistics did not excite him. Long unwieldy committee names and strings of facts tired him. In the Introduction he was able to let himself go a bit. “It may seem rather a high-pressure start—opening out the engine at once,” he wrote. “But it will be only now and then in the course of the book, that I shall get a chance to say what I think.”

He brought his manuscript to the office and the staff sat around him whilst he read it. He was very sensitive. He felt himself an amateur in the midst of a body of experts. It must have been a new experience for him to come and submit his work to a tribunal of ordinary people like ourselves. As he read on he warmed to his work. He forgot us. We forgot him. His fine voice held us. We were taken, as it were, over the world on the wings of the wind. The whole meaning of air warfare was made plain to

us. We were looking down now on this battle-field, now on that, and the whole vast organization was seen clear cut as through a diminishing glass. Now and again the glass was reversed and focused on to any individual member of the force. His feelings were laid bare to our gaze. We seemed to understand everything. We did not notice when the reading finished. The spell would hardly break. Perhaps it was not so much what was read to us, although it was inspiring; it may have been the spell cast by the author himself. Perhaps it was that the sight of him, offering himself to our judgment, flattered us to wonder. I do not know. I know that the officer who was then in charge of the Air Branch, expressed very diffidently something of what we felt at the reading. Sir Walter was immensely pleased. "I should be pretty sick if the public liked my work, and the men who have been in the air didn't," he wrote back.

At the time the Introduction was written the Air Force was in the throes of the disintegration which followed the armistice. There were criticisms in the press against the conduct of some of the members of the service. Sir Walter was impatient of these criticisms. "Critics who speak of what they have not felt and do not know, have sometimes blamed the air service because, being young, it has not the decorum of age. The Latin poet said that it is decorous to die for one's country; in that decorum the service is perfectly instructed." That is the spirit of his book.

At first he intended to devote a longish chapter only to the early history of flying, but as he dipped into the subject he found himself committed to something fuller. The first flight in a power-driven heavier-than-air machine was made on December the 17th, 1903. Eleven years later the question of war in the air was beginning to agitate the minds of half the world. The development of air power in those few short years was amazing. The movement had started with extreme sluggishness. The feat of the Wright brothers attracted little attention at first. The world which is often slow to recognize the significance of contemporary events, did not know that a new era in its history had already opened. Certainly the few years immediately following the flight over the Kill Devil sand hills were years of scepticism and witticism. Only a handful of men laboured in whole-hearted enthusiasm for the cause of the air because they had vision and knew what it meant to the future of the world. But recognition forced itself on the nations of the world. Once interest was aroused it spread with amazing swiftness. People felt uneasy. The aeroplane was taken up as a weapon of national defence. The movement was under way and gathering increasing momentum. The progress of the art must have a share in the record of the war in the air, otherwise the story would not be understood. Sir Walter soon saw this. "If the battle of Trafalgar had been fought only some ten short years after the first adventurer trusted himself to the sea on a crazy raft," he writes, "the ships, rather than the men, would be the heroes of that battle, and Nelson himself would be overshadowed by the *Victory*."

The shape of the book was a worry. "I'm having a dreadful time," he wrote early in 1919, "all by myself, struggling to get a shape for the book. However, I had ten days or so useless with a vile cold. And I dare say I shall cheer up soon." The shape began to come, and as soon as a part of the first chapter on the Conquest of the Air was written he was anxious to come up to the office to read it to us. But he didn't want to inflict himself on us. "You will see to it, won't you, that attendance is voluntary and not a parade? It must not be like family prayers." He read it to us, to our great delight, and then took it away to finish. But he was soon finding difficulties as to the length of the early history. "From the cormorant in the Garden of Eden to 1903 will be longish—too long, I think, to be part of a chapter," and so it became a chapter to itself. This was written during the Easter vacation, and then Oxford claimed him again until the summer. But when June came he was back at work on his history, and the second chapter on the Aeroplane and the Airship was being written. He progressed well. On June the 8th, 1919, he wrote, "I shall have most of a chapter ready when I come, such a chapter full of riddles and shoals." By the middle of August, Chapters II and III were ready. "I have got another bit done," he wrote announcing this fact, "completing (but for a tail to be added) Chapter II. It is too long, so Chapter II will have to be Chapters II and III, thus: Chapter II. The Aeroplane and the Airship. Chapter III. The Beginnings of Flight in England.... I have been terribly slow. Some quite small things have cost me hours of turning over pages, not to speak of letters or waiting for answers."

But when the chapters were written they were by no means finished. The Air Ministry had come into being only towards the end of the war. The Royal Air Force itself was formed on April the 1st, 1918, by the amalgamation of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service. The records telling of the early history of those two services were scattered. The collection and collation of those records took time. But it was soon seen even in the early days that there would be sad gaps. Some important records were definitely lost. Others were missing. But apart from this even where they were complete, Sir Walter found much difficulty in weaving his story from official records. He wanted so much to get the personal element into his book. Official records he discovered were invented to conceal interesting facts. They were packed in wool and cut no ice. He once complained that he asked for butter and received a cow. So we were always trying to supplement the records with first-hand evidence. Much of this material came late. Many important facts turned up after the chapters had been written. They were constantly being touched up (alas!).

An early example of this sort of thing was when Mr. G. B. Cockburn, who had taught the navy to fly, kindly sent us his reminiscences. "The reminiscences of G. B. Cockburn matter so much that I am rewriting the whole of Eastchurch and Larkhill. It is a nuisance, but I suppose is bound to happen again." He was so considerate for his readers. "I can't say to readers, 'You all know what an air-raid is like, so I shall only tell you how many they were and what weight of bombs was dropped,' they must be helped a little to see the thing!"

So passed the summer vacation and then Oxford filled up again and engulfed him. The prospect of 4,000 students in Oxford, although it was not what he expected when he undertook to write the history, was a prospect which pleased him. His research into the history stimulated him. When he came to lecture to his new students he was better than ever. His lectures were inspiring. "Oxford is

full of the best lot of men we have ever had, mostly back from the war, and when they want my services I can't refuse them, so I have no time. But I shall shut the door in mid-March." In mid-March he shut the door and prepared for a visit to town. "I am always cheered by a visit to the factory of air history," he wrote, and further, "the weak point of this show is the Old Historian."

By the summer of 1920 the pre-war period of the history was finished and he was working on the war period, and the war period offered different problems. Sir Walter looked upon himself as holding a special brief for those members of the air services who did their duty and were content to do their duty without any sort of publicity or reward. He was no believer in star-turns. He believed, with the officers who commanded the air services, as he says in his Introduction, in a high tableland of duty and efficiency and not a low range of achievement rising now and again into sharp fantastic peaks. "The humblest flier," he wrote in a letter discussing this subject, "who went and strafed a Boche and got done in is not going to be sacrificed or even subordinated to the star performers. Every V.C. shall be clearly told that men who deserved as well or better than he did are forgotten, in large numbers, because they faced certain death without witnesses. The hero of the book is chosen and is the Air, not the stars." And this is how he tells them in his book. "No history can be expected to furnish a full record of all the acts of prowess that were performed in the air during the long course of the war. Many of the best of them can never be known; the Victoria Cross has surely been earned, over and over again, by pilots and observers who went east, and lie in unvisited graves. The public dearly loves a hero; but the men who have been both heroic and lucky must share their honours, as they are the first to insist, with others whose courage was not less, though luck failed them."

Like his friend Sir James Barrie, Sir Walter believed courage to be the lovely virtue. He was fond of dissecting the British character. His book on the air is full of delightful passages on this subject. Courage, he says in his book, is found everywhere amongst English-speaking peoples. Originally he wrote that courage was an epidemic virtue among English-speaking peoples. Some people who were privileged to read his original manuscript, were a bit doubtful about this use of the word 'epidemic.' One distinguished air officer spoke rather roughly about "outbreaks of pimples." Sir Walter altered the phrase and in a characteristic note, which shows the trouble he took to find a single correct word, he wrote to me on a postcard, "I find *epidemic* is used by Milton and Swift as I use it. Later the word was restricted to medical uses (and metaphors drawn therefrom). I suppose my writing is too much under old and classic influences, for I did not at first understand the objection. I don't know what to do. Where modern semi-educated usage impoverishes a word, I hate to give way. But I want to be understood."

Official documents do not always show such nice choice of words. Sir Walter accordingly sometimes got high fun out of the records. A pamphlet (a very able one) was sent to him mostly dealing with the supply of munitions. "I wonder," he wrote, "in what language does the Munitions Man write to his wife? I shall set him to my classes to translate, e.g., 'The output of light bombs was greatly in excess of that of the heavier natures' = 'The bombs made were mostly light bombs.'"

"When he says 'in the case of bombs,' he doesn't mean the case. When he says evolve, factors, evaluate, and the like, he doesn't mean anything much. Public office English is 'a bloody jargon.'" And again, "Lord Haldane, in a letter to me, says the Wrights were 'empirics.' I suppose he means they merely did it."

But Sir Walter could never be anything but good-natured in his fun-making. He enjoyed life to the full and sought fun wherever he could find it. And perhaps he found it most in the dignity of outlook of what he sometimes called the big-bugs. On seeing the photograph of one distinguished public man who takes himself very seriously, he commented, "It was of a face like —'s that Charles Whibley once said, 'God has put that mark upon them so that we may know them.'"

Towards the end of 1920 the book was nearing completion. The last chapter was started but had given a lot of trouble. It was a ticklish chapter on the expansion of the air services, and the difficulty was to find the thread of the story. On this he was helped by Sir Sefton Brancker and Sir Hugh Trenchard, whom he always referred to as the General. "I have been in correspondence with Brancker," he wrote. "He and the General won't fail us.... I wish I were writing, instead of acting coroner at an inquest where it's not certain who's the corpse, and the witnesses won't talk. But we must do it. We lose a lot by being so near—all the later diaries, lives, etc. Our one advantage is living testimony, and we *must* get it."

Whilst he was waiting for further light on the problems of the last chapter he went to stay with Mr. Pearsall Smith at Warsash. "I had a good holiday of ten days—it seemed quite long," he wrote. "I was taught the art of beach-combing. My friend who taught me got thirty-two oysters in three-quarters of an hour on a repulsive tidal beach. I got five in two hours. But I devoted myself mainly to the cockle who (it is not generally known) is as cunning as sin, very mobile, and quick-sighted. There are also occasional hauls from wrecks. August and September have been a stale-mate, and I'm itching to write. I hope to come up on Oct. 19th when the term is started."

When he returned from his holiday he found Oxford busier than ever. The last worrying chapter was put aside for the moment. "Oxford's worse than ever. Not a bed or a perch anywhere.... I lead the life of a defaulting debtor, chivied by people who behave as if they had lent me money." And again a little later, "This week is a nightmare, but things will get better soon after they get worse. I allude not to the Coal Strike but to committees, boards, lectures and examinations." But examinations ended and he got back to the troublous Chapter VIII, and by the middle of December wrote, "I pine to show you what I have written. There's not very much yet—about twenty-five of my MS. pages." But he got stuck again at the beginning of January. "Your letter was a comfort. Since you left I have stuck. Partly I got wet and tired on a long walk, but chiefly, I can't see my way clear. The summaries I have are so full of things too trivial (though I must have them and they are invaluable) ... I think a pæan on the squadron

must go into the next (i.e., the fighting) volume. It belongs there. It's really a short treatise on morale. I think I can end Chapter VIII without it, but we shall see.... Official reports are all packed in wool and won't cut ice."

Then in February he went down with a slight fever. "I have gastric influenza and fever," he wrote on the 5th, followed on the 17th by "I'm up and better, only rather groggy (or, to be strictly correct, shaky) on my pins." Once again Oxford took him off the last chapter. But in mid-March he shut the doors once more, "My term has taken long in dying, but now at last I think it is dead, and my mind (a rag-bag stuffed with its debris) is free for other uses (as soon as I can empty it)."

He got to work again and tackled some of the notes which the office had prepared for him to use in the revision of the early chapters. "Your^[1] method of preparing things for revision," he wrote, "is excellent and will make revision easier.... I have gloomy forebodings about ——. Will he be another of those whose criticisms amount, in effect, to a single complaint that they are wallflowers at the aerial dance?... My troubles are of a different kind. You remember I treated naval co-operation in Chapter VII slightly. Now I have to treat it all over again. I wonder (though with pain) if the passages in Chapter VII ought not to be taken out and the whole thing put into Chapter VIII. Tell me your opinion. As it stands the only excuse is that Chapter VII is things done, and Chapter VIII is organization, constitution, etc. But the doubt paralyses me, for am I writing (or about to write) what must all be recast again?"

Through March he was deep in the last chapter. On the 22nd he wrote: "I am always unhappy if I find myself using an unexplained term. I fear I have sometimes mentioned types of machine with no explanatory comment. You might keep an eye open for this. It is a large comfort to me to have you goal-keeping." And on the 27th: "You will think me hopeless, but I am really stuck in the naval part of Chapter VIII. You see *I don't know*. If none of the questions that interest me are answered in the summaries I have, are not my readers likely to be in the same position?"

In the middle of April he came up to town and had dinner with General Brancker. The following day he wrote: "Brancker depresses me, because, whatever I mention he says something true and important that has not reached us. He knows all the people and is a shrewd and cheerful judge of them. I must tell you when we meet.... The latter^[2] is wonderful on any period or any incident, shake the tree and a plum falls off.... Brancker is as gay as a lark."

Chapter VIII was finished at last and Sir Walter's life-work was nearing completion. The next effort was revision. This effort was almost as worrying as the original writing. The records are often contradictory and sometimes a whole day was spent trying to check some small fact which eventually was cut out of the book.

Perhaps the greatest trouble when revising was given by the question of wireless. Sir Walter was a man of letters. He was intensely interested in anything and everything, however, and was not content to accept any technical facts. He wanted to understand them. He was a constant interrogative. Indeed it seemed sometimes as he curled his long body into curious shapes in his chair that he formed a note of interrogation. This question of the why? was no new developed one. He once told me that when as a small boy he was sent to a governess, he was given a Latin grammar and severely told to learn the first declension. The word meant nothing to him. "Please what's a declension?" he asked. "*That's* a declension, and you just learn it," was the reply. But the answer was inadequate and Sir Walter took no further interest in the lesson. He could not learn where he was not interested. It was no use talking to him about "coherers" and "microhenries." His only comment would be that "microhenries" were far better called "harries" for short.

So when after Chapter V had been written Captain Morris found new and interesting information on the use of wireless telegraphy in aircraft in the days before the war, the whole of this difficult chapter had to be reopened for new patching. "In regard to wireless," he wrote, "I am like a blind man who has never talked to painters employed to write a critique of a picture exhibition. It's paralysing. The only escape is to keep on broad lines. Every one knows that wireless sends messages. I shall be happier when *events* begin again."

"I think I had better come up for a day and have a long talk with you instead of writing what will have to be rewritten." But he got to work on wireless, and on May the 9th, "I have written about twenty or more of my pages on wireless. I believe I have made it much clearer and simpler *than it is*. I have arranged to come to London on Monday, June 20, bringing Chapter V (which is the devil) and as much more as I can. VI will be plainer sailing." But before he came to London he struggled on with the wireless history. On May the 24th he wrote, "I fear I shall make you impatient. I can go on, if I have to, and copy the statements I have. But if I were a reader of the book, it would annoy me by avoiding the questions that naturally suggest themselves to an intelligent reader who has had no technical education," and two days later, "I know from long experience that any one who attempts accurately to repeat what he does not understand never repeats it accurately.... If I could get my brain tuned to the wave-lengths of all these papers, something would begin to come through. All the oscillations of my mind are strongly damped, but I hope soon to get an oscillating current of high frequency.... After all it's very little I need write about the process and instruments.... What is Rouzet's full name?"

But June came and he was still working away with pain. "I feel I owe you an apology, yet I am doing what I can. It's the most difficult thing yet—wireless, I mean. It is coming into shape, but there is something absurd about sandwiching it in as an afterthought. It's of first-rate importance, and I fear it may delay us a little." Then on June the 12th:

"I shall come on Monday next week, latish morning, *with Chapter V*. Not content or pleased. That wireless insertion has put the chapter out of gear, and lots of small things, later on, seem clumsy. One can't write a book backwards. But I think we can patch it to look all right. I depend on you and the

office to go through my revised Chapter V in the interests of consistency rather than of truth. I think the facts are right now, and the chapter is like a plain-faced clumsy person celebrated for saying true things in the wrong time and in the wrong place."

"Exam papers are pouring in in large bundles. I grudge every minute to them.... I hope and believe that there won't be another Chapter V."

Chapter V was sent to the printers for proofs. In the meantime Sir Walter had sent the chapter to one or two people to read over the wireless portion. Sir Richard Glazebrook sent him some valuable notes.

"I have just got the proofs of Chapter V. I am an unnatural parent—I yawn over them. But I could do something to them while I am in the country and thus break the tedium of a holiday, if I might have the Glazebrook notes." He could not take—what he badly needed—a real carefree holiday. "I am taking down Chapter VI for a week into the country, where American and other visitors to Oxford can't call on me at 11 a.m. I hope to finish it."

At last came the Preface.

"I am drafting a Preface. What is our office called?... The Preface, I think, will be very brief, and will try to avoid the sin of prefaces, which mostly speak with the voice of a hen when she has laid an egg.... Some civilians must be mentioned. C. G. Grey certainly, and I should like your opinion on the others...."

The question of names in the Preface was debated. Wherever possible they were instead acknowledged in the text.

"I enclose a draft Preface. Will you see what you think of it? It gets into a flowing style before it ends, but the important thing is—does it say all it ought to say?"

"I am jolly glad to be relieved of the necessity of giving long lists of helpers' names. They only cumber a book, and are tombstones that are read by none but the corpse."

There were still a few outstanding questions. The index was one which caused a certain amount of discussion. He was anxious not to have an index for each volume. He contended that there must eventually be a final index and that this could only be made by combining the indexes from each volume which he thought was clumsy. So it was decided not to have an index, but instead to have rather full summaries of each chapter.

Another question that was debated was that of maps and illustrations. He was all against a lot of illustrations. He thought they were unnecessary for a good book and useless in a bad one. There was talk of a large map of France to go into a pocket at the end of the book. Some sort of a map was necessary to illustrate the chapter dealing with the early days in France from Mons to Ypres. "I am still in favour of the one page map wherever possible—and I hate the pocket business. Map-makers care nothing about books. A book with a pocket is not a book.... The chart-makers who are admirable want a book to help the maps. I want maps to help the book. If stuff is good to read you don't break it off repeatedly to look up places on a map." And the question of type for the book, "Will you settle the type?" he wrote, "I am tired of my own open-mindedness." And then sending a specimen page from the Clarendon Press, "This is the page, I think. I like the old-fashioned uniform type—it does not depreciate quotations as the modern system of mixed types or closer spacing does. If you agree, can we fix it up?" Then came the death of General Sir David Henderson at Geneva and of Air-Commodore Maitland in the R38. Emendations were made in the proofs. "I have added a kind of summary on Henderson, rather bold I think, but true and appreciative. I call him a white man which he was. If I can find the time I will write an additional bit on Maitland to be added in Chapter V."

The following day another letter enclosed the bit on Maitland. "Here is an obituary (so to say) of Maitland. It does not half express my admiration. He was as quiet as a Quaker, and as considerate as a hospital nurse. I wonder if he ever knew fear. It sounds extravagant but I don't think so—not even in the R38.... Will you have it added to the proofs? So things go on, by degrees."

In December he hoped that we should be able "to send proofs to all the big-wigs before Christmas." In January, "I want to hear that the book is finally in the hands of the Press and that you are going to be married."

Sir Walter criticized his own work pretty freely. In his final letters before he went on his luckless journey to Baghdad he gives an occasional amusing summary of the book. "The whole book is like Blindman's Buff," he wrote just before he sailed. "You catch some one and feel his face and guess at him. No doubt you are sometimes too complimentary to an ugly fellow, and then the others who are not blinded laugh in their sleeves. Sometimes you say what every one else had thought without saying it." Or this:

"The book, especially in the parts that have given us trouble, is like a schoolboy's cake—too rich in facts and not suited for quantitative reading. Still it's better than soothing syrup or thin gruel." And finally in his letter to me forwarding Chapter VI heavily corrected, "Some authors seem to expect fame. I shall be satisfied with forgiveness."

because of his great height, a smile of welcome on his fine face, the collar of his inside coat sticking out above his outer coat. He would pause for just a moment as if to take in the occupants of the room, and then he would come quickly forward to shake hands, and at once his rapid, witty, bubbling conversation would flow. His conversation was brilliant. You listened amazed. Barely had you caught one choice bit of wisdom before he was off on another. It was bewildering. When he was gone you sometimes tried to recall them. Impossible! He seemed to await with you his next effort. As it shaped itself in his mind and fell almost at once from his lips he would sometimes look at you, hold you with his eyes for a second as if to say, "Are you getting that?—I'm getting it," and then when he saw you had, you would both break into laughter. He stood, it almost seemed, on one side and enjoyed with you his other self.

It would be vain to attempt to reconstruct his conversation. His gestures, the moods which passed across his face as he spoke, the play with his enormous pipe—all these are essential to a true appreciation of his talk. He would be talking. The pipe is out. Out comes a box of matches. He strikes one and applies it to his pipe. As the flame touches the bowl, a thought strikes him. The thought will not keep. Off he goes into conversation, holding the match until he is reminded of its presence when it burns down to his fingers. He strikes another and the same thing happens again. After he had sat smoking and talking in the office for a morning, the grate would be full of charred match-ends, silent, derelict victims of his bubbling thoughts. He might want to illustrate his anecdotes. Before one realized the fact he was off up and down the room in martial stride showing his idea of the goose step, or else he would dive for his hat to show a type of headgear that his wife considered to be inadequate to the dignity of a professor about to visit Egypt. Through his eyes one could understand most things. His vision, his judgment, his sympathy and his experience were all at your service. He touched all the emotions and left you bewildered but infinitely grateful for his company. He loved his visits to London because he got talk with all kinds of people. This he could not get at Oxford, where, he jokingly remarked, he saw the War in the Air from a bottle.

Some time in January on one of his visits to London we fell to discussing the lay-out for the second volume. Our conversation ranged over all the various theatres of war. We lingered on the East, because it attracted him. We mutually regretted that the signing of the armistice had stopped a visit which he was to have made to the flying fronts of the Middle East. He felt he ought to see it. The first volume was out of the way. The Easter vacation was coming. Why not go then? I told him I thought there would be every service help for him once he got there. The thing was tentatively fixed. I telephoned the steamship company and retained a passage in the s.s. *Egypt*—ill-fated vessel. We discussed the itinerary and then passed to other subjects. I had misgivings. Not that I thought he was too old to undertake the journey, but because I knew how tireless and conscientious he was. I felt that he might be too vigorous, that it might take too much out of him and so leave him weak for disease. But I knew also that his visit would be enormously useful because it would make all the difference to the spirit of the history of the Middle East. The journey to France had supplied the cream of his first volume. The journey East would do the same for the rest of the work. Not that it was any good pointing out the difficulties and drawbacks of the journey. I did try something of that sort. "Adventures must be done, my boy," was his reply. He had gone to India soon after leaving Cambridge. In India he had been attracted to Baghdad. He tried to get there by caravan. He had to wait until he could get there by aeroplane.

Every facility was given him by the Air Ministry (although he paid for the journey himself). He wrote to tell me that the thing was fixed. "I had a letter from the General, enclosing a copy of a letter he has sent to W. G. Salmond, asking for every facility for me—beyond anything I should have asked or hoped.

"So I wired you for the bunk—a complete room at the extra charge (of £18 I think)....

"When I come up I hope you may be able to fit me out with maps to use from the air, and with some things to read preparatory.

"It's a good (mild) adventure. Thank you immensely for the dates, etc.

"The General has sent them all over to Salmond, for his successor.

"So there I am, and it's me for Baghdad, 'Orace, my boy. (I am thinking of what Robertson said to Smith-Dorrien.)

"It seems they will try to take me to anything it is important I should see, so I depend on your advice.

"You shall have a cheque as soon as *I get the bill*.

"I owe all this suggestion to you. Bacon says there are things a man can't decently do or claim for himself, and then a friend comes in."

In reply I sent him a passport form. "Many thanks for the passport form," he wrote. ("A lot of notice the Arabs will take of it if I come among them!")

Sir Walter left London on March the 16th to take the *Egypt* at Marseilles. He stayed in London for a couple of days before he left and worked hard at the office putting in page headings on the latest proofs which had just come in from the Clarendon Press. We had to take a hurried lunch. Sir Walter liked a good meal to the accompaniment of beer. I suggested a tavern near Oxford Circus identified with the male domestic fowl. There is an excellent dining-room over the main bar. The food is as good as is procurable anywhere in London. The Scotch ale has a bite in it. Sir Walter looked round the assembled business men when we were seated and remarked that he had no doubts as to the quality of the cooking. The best advertisement for the cut off the joint was in the faces of the diners. He asked me what they all did (I could only guess). He was soon in conversation with the gentleman next him, whom he congratulated on the excellent portion of Shepherds Pie which was placed before him. Did

Sir Walter knew Mr. — (the proprietor) when he had the *Swinging Anchor* round the corner (or words to that effect). Sir Walter regretted he did not. His neighbour then became reminiscent on the history of lunches enjoyed under Mr. —'s direction over a period of twenty years; his reminiscences were punctuated by witty remarks from Sir Walter, which sent him off again into new channels.

Sir Walter enjoyed the lunch so much that on the following day he looked forward to going again. On this occasion, when he was paying the waitress—a shrewd Cockney girl—he was asked whether he found it cold up there—this being by way of a joke on his height as he towered above her waiting for his bill. He was just like that. Every one felt at home with him. His great charm of manner, his dignity, his delightful old-world courtesy, especially with ladies, made him at home but also conspicuous in any assembly. His human qualities earned him the friendliness, even the banter, of people who came into contact with him, but he never in any way lost either dignity or distinction as a result.

He went off to Egypt like a schoolboy going for his holidays. He carried with him an unbound copy of his first volume. From Marseilles I received a typical letter.

“P. & O. s.s. *Egypt*.

“Marseilles, March the 27th.

“Cabin passage. Punctual. Good night. French on the make. Train table d’hôte twenty-five francs, everything extra. Few passengers on boat. This is the Alfred Jingle style, but it contains all I have to say. It won’t be easy to work or read, for every one is on the prowl looking for some one else to talk to or to play Bridge with. I must be *strong* and refuse Bridge at first. Or at least so as not to be grumpy, I shall say, ‘Bridge—delighted.’ I love to play Bridge. Let me see—I always forget—are there four suits or five? Of course I know there are twelve cards in each suit.

“Talk is not so easily dealt with. But there are some decent people on board. I have talked with two sad, efficient, disgruntled Indian Colonels, going back to earn their pension. And of course there are social ladies. When I was a lean gawky youth, they were not kind enough to me. I don’t blame them, but when they are kind now, I wish they had come earlier.

“Book is all right. Small corrections occur to me. Can’t make ’em now. Doesn’t matter. God be with the office and all that therein are!”

A few days later he arrived at Port Said and sent me the last letter I ever received from him.

“Here I am at Port Said after a calm and easy voyage.... I am to go by train to Jerusalem to-night (it takes some seventeen or eighteen hours). There I am to meet Ellington and to be his fellow-guest at the house of the High Commissioner. He is to drive me to the Nablus road. Then to Cairo by aeroplane and from Cairo direct to Baghdad....

“It’s going to be tiresome to-night, but once I get to the R.A.F. I think things will be very easy....

“Baghdad seems to be a gay centre. I came on the boat with Major Lord Gough, a one-armed Irish officer, who has left home to escape the tax-collector, and is going to command Arab levies at Baghdad. He will do well, I am sure; he is cool, pleasant, practical, ready-witted and original. Indeed he shocked the Anglo-Indian officers on board, but the Arabs, I think, will take to him.

“It has all been absurdly easy up to now, thanks to you. I will write again.”

He never did.

The next time I saw him was at Victoria Station on his return on April the 25th. He had been due to arrive the previous day. Lady Raleigh had spent the day meeting continental trains. She had to return to Oxford on the Tuesday afternoon, so I went down that evening to watch the trains in to see if he would arrive. The likeliest one was the train timed to arrive at 7.30. Actually it came in, in two portions, an hour later. Sir Walter was on the second train. He stepped out of the saloon loaded like a Christmas tree. He had all his own luggage packed for convenience of travelling in suit-cases. He carried a topee and wore a waterproof cap, with many flaps and folds, slightly tilted. Under one arm packed in straw and canvas was a thigh boot which some one had given to him in the desert with a request that he bring it to London and have it delivered to the address marked on it, where, presumably, it was to be half-soled and heeled or otherwise reconstructed. Under the other arm was a large round bundle, similarly addressed for delivery to a lady in London. This parcel, he supposed, contained Turkish Delight. This fugitive gift to a lady was carried a few thousand miles from the desert by Sir Walter Raleigh, already in the grip of a fatal fever. The many stories of his great forbear hardly approach this for sheer charm and gallantry!

It was raining in torrents and a bit chilly. I got a taxi and Sir Walter directed the driver to the Waldorf. He was unwilling to disturb his club as he had not wired for a room. The Waldorf was full and we went on to the Cecil. Not a room in the place, so on to the Metropole. He himself jumped out here a little impatiently, but was received, as he said, somewhat coldly by the office staff who, after keeping him waiting, spoke to him almost with astonishment that he should have the temerity to ask for accommodation. At the Victoria, the same story. We then tried a small hotel in one of the side streets off Charing Cross—Craven Street, I think. They had nothing. Yes, if he did not mind there was a small room through the office and connected with it. He took it gladly. It was small. But as he washed he carried on a conversation with the proprietress, a woman of friendly manners. We could get nothing to eat there, and he had had no dinner. He looked very tired and a bit faraway.

We went, through the driving rain, to a near-by restaurant. He chose something, but when it came,

although it looked very good, he complained after eating a little that it was not nice. It was so unlike him. However, he ordered some soft roes on toast and we sat on till near midnight whilst he talked of his tour. He was full of it. Full of stories and impressions. I asked him if he had made notes of the more interesting things that had struck him. He had not. He had them all in his head. He told how at the aerodrome at Amman an Arab Sheikh had appeared with his followers, all heavily armed with service rifles and bristling with ammunition. Sir Walter and the Sheikh were introduced and sat together awhile at a corner of the aerodrome. The Sheikh occasionally stroking Sir Walter's cheek apparently as a mark of friendliness. The followers formed a large circle round them and squatted. This went on for a bit and then the conversation being rather one-sided Sir Walter got bored and walked away to sit at another part of the aerodrome. He was deep in thought. He looked up and there silently squatting around again were the Arabs with the sun gleaming on their rifles. He talked a bit with the Sheikh and then tiring got up and sought the officer in charge of the aerodrome.

"What do you do when you want to get rid of these fellows?" he asked.

"Do?" was the reply. "What do we do? Why, we take a big stick and tell them to hop it."

The big stick was produced, the order was given, the rifles were quietly slung and the Arabs went. They were like children, said Sir Walter, and knew what you meant when you told them that you didn't want to play with them any more.

He spoke of his stay with the High Commissioner at Jerusalem. How he had gone over the road on which the Turkish 7th Army had been bombed from the air until it had become a rabble. The havoc of that day—September the 21st, 1918—was made clear to him. The Turkish armies were in retreat. Soon after dawn on the 21st a reconnaissance machine landed with the information that dense masses of men and transport were on the road running north-east from Nablus. This was the Turkish 7th Army making for the Jordan, hoping to cross at Jisr-ed-Damieh. The enemy retreat via Beisan had already been blocked by the cavalry, but it was out of the question that ground troops could guard the Jordan crossings for some hours. If the road could not be blocked from the air, the army would escape. All available aeroplanes were got together and there began the most awful disaster which has ever been suffered from the air by an army. To strike from the air you must strike quick and strike ceaselessly. The attack was arranged so that two machines should arrive over the retreating enemy every three minutes. In addition a formation of six machines was sent over every half-hour. The attack started at 8 o'clock in the morning. At noon it was all over. The road is bordered by steep ravines. No cover for a rabbit. There was no escaping the pitiless rain of machine-gun bullets poured on to the enemy from a low height, or the bombs which soon reduced the head of the column to chaos. The road was blocked, but there was panic pressure from the rear. Dead were piled on dead. Drivers jumped from their motor-lorries. Motor-lorries ran amok. Horses stamped, tramping soldiers to death beneath their hoofs. Guns were overturned. Every three minutes and every half-hour with demoniacal precision the aeroplanes appeared, did their job, and went. Every three minutes and every half-hour on the ground confusion worse confounded. The Turkish 7th Army a few hours before in orderly retreat, soon ceased to exist. Sir Walter inspected the road on a Scots Grey charger. He confessed that he was brought somewhat into sympathy with the panic of the retreat because he was not at home on a charger. On one occasion, and at a precipitous and dangerous piece of road, with a slope to doom on one side and an oppressive gaunt height on the other, Sir Walter coughed. The charger taking this as a sign of encouragement, went off at a gallop. Happily Sir Walter recovered his nerve and the reins without much loss of time. He talked of this trip, telling how the point where the bombing started is marked by the stone on which Christ sat and talked to the woman of Samaria.

The soft roes on toast arrived and he ordered another beer. And then on to the desert. The aeroplane on which he was making the journey to Baghdad had a mishap and landed in the desert. For four or five days no relief arrived. The little party soon exhausted their stock of sandwiches and had to fall back on bully-beef and biscuits. They made tea in petrol tins. A wise friend had insisted on giving Sir Walter a present of a bottle of whisky just before he left for the East. At the time he thought the present superfluous. But during the stay in the desert, it was invaluable. It made him most popular. He found it difficult to get on with the hard food. He was sixty-one. But it was another adventure and he loved it. He must have been the life of the little party. He invented a game. They chased paper boats to a given point on the sand, made a bet and then each ran after his fancy. They organized sweepstakes as to the time and hour and direction from which relief would come. Sir Walter never won. Relief came with Sir Edward Ellington on his way to Baghdad.

The journey was resumed. At Baghdad Sir Walter sickened. But he flew to Mosul. At Mosul he fell sick of a fever. But his adventure was not over, so he shook off his fever and flew back to Baghdad. He saw and talked with everybody he could. He was delighted with Baghdad. The dream of years had come true and the truth was finer than the dream. That is how he found life. He recalled the taste of Baghdad. How an apparent mist was hanging over the city when they came to it from the air. How it was found to be not a mist, but the mud of centuries. He still had the curious taste of it, he said, as he gulped a little beer, as if to wash it away.

The following morning he came to the office before leaving for Oxford. He made a few additional corrections to his book. The next news we had told us of his illness. But he was still light-hearted and we never knew how ill he was. In a letter to Colonel Daniel, written on May the 4th in reply to an invitation to dinner, he says: "It can't be done. They work away at my temperature but without much success. They are of course tyrannical and refuse me beer, which I pine for. When I can get up to London we will have some beer. They also fill me with things the taste of which to any reverent natural theologian is sufficient proof that God never intended these things for human consumption. I hope it won't be very long, but I am sure it can't be next week." The next week his fever had been diagnosed as typhoid, and on May the 13th he was dead. His last adventure was over. At the height of his powers he was touched and taken by the long arm of war.

He loved the wide, wide world. He loved dearly his fellow-men. The world is a better place for his having passed through it. He left behind him books that will live, but he was not chiefly a writer. More than anything else he leaves behind his example. He touched and made brighter with his genius all who came into contact with him. To be with him was to lose pettiness. His personal influence has gone out quietly to a thousand different corners of the Empire. We may lament his death and the possibilities which died with him. There is no unmixed good on earth. We can rejoice at his life and be humbly grateful for his example. He was a great Englishman.

[1.](#) When he says “you” and “your” in these letters Sir Walter means the Air Historical Branch.

[2.](#) General Brancker.

Transcriber's Notes

Footnotes have been moved to the end of the text.

Inconsistencies have been retained in spelling, hyphenation, and grammar, except where indicated in the list below. In some cases, minor punctuation errors have been corrected.

He loved the wide wide world. —> He loved the wide, wide world.
quantitative reading. —> quantitative reading.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SIR WALTER RALEIGH AND THE AIR HISTORY: A
PERSONAL RECOLLECTION ***

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