

CHAPTER XXIII. WHILE THE AEROPLANES WERE COMING

For a time the Master of the Earth was not even master of his own mind. Even his will seemed a will not his own, his own acts surprised him and were but a part of the confusion of strange experiences that poured across his being. These things were definite, the aeroplanes were coming, Helen Wotton had warned the people of their coming, and he was Master of the Earth. Each of these facts seemed struggling for complete possession of his thoughts. They protruded from a background of swarming halls, elevated passages, rooms jammed with ward leaders in council kinematograph and telephone rooms, and windows looking out on a seething sea of marching men. The man in yellow, and men whom he fancied were called Ward Leaders, were either propelling him forward or following him obediently; it was hard to tell. Perhaps they were doing a little of both. Perhaps some power unseen and unsuspected, propelled them all. He was aware that he was going to make a proclamation to the People of the Earth, aware of certain grandiose phrases floating in his mind as the thing he meant to say. Many little things happened, and then he found himself with the man in yellow entering a little room where this proclamation of his was to be made.

This room was grotesquely latter-day in its appointments. In the centre was a bright oval lit by shaded electric lights from above. The rest was in shadow, and the double finely fitting doors through which he came from the swarming Hall of the Atlas made the place very still. The dead thud of these as they closed behind him, the sudden cessation of the

tumult in which he had been living for hours, the quivering circle of light, the whispers and quick noiseless movements of vaguely visible attendants in the shadows, had a strange effect upon Graham. The huge ears of a phonographic mechanism gaped in a battery for his words, the black eyes of great photographic cameras awaited his beginning, beyond metal rods and coils glittered dimly, and something whirled about with a droning hum. He walked into the centre of the light, and his shadow drew together black and sharp to a little blot at his feet.

The vague shape of the thing he meant to say was already in his mind. But this silence, this isolation, the sudden withdrawal from that contagious crowd, this silent audience of gaping, glaring machines had not been in his anticipation. All his supports seemed withdrawn together; he seemed to have dropped into this suddenly, suddenly to have discovered himself. In a moment he was changed. He found that he now feared to be inadequate, he feared to be theatrical, he feared the quality of his voice, the quality of his wit, astonished, he turned to the man in yellow with a propitiatory gesture. "For a moment," he said, "I must wait. I did not think it would be like this. I must think of the thing I have to say."

While he was still hesitating there came an agitated messenger with news that the foremost aeroplanes were passing over Arawan.

"Arawan?" he said. "Where is that? But anyhow, they are coming. They will be here. When?"

"By twilight."

"Great God! In only a few hours. What news of the flying stages?" he asked.

"The people of the south-west wards are ready."

"Ready!"

He turned impatiently to the blank circles of the lenses again.

"I suppose it must be a sort of speech. Would to God I knew certainly the thing that should be said! Aeroplanes at Arawan! They must have started before the main fleet. And the people only ready! Surely..."

"Oh! what does it matter whether I speak well or ill?" he said, and felt the light grow brighter.

He had framed some vague sentence of democratic sentiment when suddenly doubts overwhelmed him. His belief in his heroic quality and calling he found had altogether lost its assured conviction. The picture of a little strutting futility in a windy waste of incomprehensible destinies replaced it. Abruptly it was perfectly clear to him that this revolt against Ostrog was premature, foredoomed to failure, the impulse of passionate inadequacy against inevitable things. He thought of that

swift flight of aeroplanes like the swoop of Fate towards him. He was astonished that he could have seen things in any other light. In that final emergency he debated, thrust debate resolutely aside, determined at all costs to go through with the thing he had undertaken. And he could find no word to begin. Even as he stood, awkward, hesitating, with an indiscrete apology for his inability trembling on his lips, came the noise of many people crying out, the running to and fro of feet. "Wait," cried someone, and a door opened. "She is coming," said the voices. Graham turned, and the watching lights waned.

Through the open doorway he saw a slight grey figure advancing across a spacious hall. His heart leapt. It was Helen Wotton. Behind and about her marched a riot of applause. The man in yellow came out of the nearer shadows into the circle of light.

"This is the girl who told us what Ostrog had done," he said.

Her face was aflame, and the heavy coils of her black hair fell about her shoulders. The folds of the soft silk robe she wore streamed from her and floated in the rhythm of her advance. She drew nearer and nearer, and his heart was beating fast. All his doubts were gone. The shadow of the doorway fell athwart her face and she was near him. "You have not betrayed us?" she cried. "You are with us?"

"Where have you been?" said Graham.

"At the office of the south-west wards. Until ten minutes since I did not know you had returned. I went to the office of the south-west wards to find the Ward Leaders in order that they might tell the people."

"I came back so soon as I heard--."

"I knew," she cried, "knew you would be with us. And it was I--it was I that told them. They have risen. All the world is rising. The people have awakened. Thank God that I did not act in vain! You are Master still."

"You told them" he said slowly, and he saw that in spite of her steady eyes her lips trembled and her throat rose and fell.

"I told them. I knew of the order. I was here. I heard that the negroes were to come to London to guard you and to keep the people down--to keep you a prisoner. And I stopped it. I came out and told the people. And you are Master still."

Graham glanced at the black lenses of the cameras, the vast listening ears, and back to her face. "I am Master still," he said slowly, and the swift rush of a fleet of aeroplanes passed across his thoughts.

"And you did this? You, who are the niece of Ostrog."

"For you," she cried. "For you! That you for whom the world has waited

should not be cheated of your power."

Graham stood for a space, wordless, regarding her. His doubts and questionings had fled before her presence. He remembered the things that he had meant to say. He faced the cameras again and the light about him grew brighter. He turned again towards her.

"You have saved me," he said; "you have saved my power. And the battle is beginning. God knows what this night will see--but not dishonour."

He paused. He addressed himself to the unseen multitudes who stared upon him through those grotesque black eyes. At first he spoke slowly. "Men and women of the new age," he said; "You have arisen to do battle for the race... There is no easy victory before us."

He stopped to gather words. The thoughts that had been in his mind before she came returned, but transfigured, no longer touched with the shadow of a possible irrelevance. "This night is a beginning," he cried. "This battle that is coming, this battle that rushes upon us to-night, is only a beginning. All your lives, it may be, you must fight. Take no thought though I am beaten, though I am utterly overthrown."

He found the thing in his mind too vague for words. He paused momentarily, and broke into vague exhortations, and then a rush of speech came upon him. Much that he said was but the humanitarian commonplace of a vanished age, but the conviction of his voice touched

it to vitality. He stated the case of the old days to the people of the new age, to the woman at his side. "I come out of the past to you," he said, "with the memory of an age that hoped. My age was an age of dreams--of beginnings, an age of noble hopes; throughout the world we had made an end of slavery; throughout the world we had spread the desire and anticipation that wars might cease, that all men and women might live nobly, in freedom and peace. ... So we hoped in the days that are past. And what of those hopes? How is it with man after two hundred years?"

"Great cities, vast powers, a collective greatness beyond our dreams. For that we did not work, and that has come. But how is it with the little lives that make up this greater life? How is it with the common lives? As it has ever been--sorrow and labour, lives cramped and unfulfilled, lives tempted by power, tempted by wealth, and gone to waste and folly. The old faiths have faded and changed, the new faith--. Is there a new faith?"

Things that he had long wished to believe, he found that he believed. He plunged at belief and seized it, and clung for a time at her level. He spoke gustily, in broken incomplete sentences, but with all his heart and strength, of this new faith within him. He spoke of the greatness of self-abnegation, of his belief in an immortal life of Humanity in which we live and move and have our being. His voice rose and fell, and the recording appliances hummed their hurried applause, dim attendants watched him out of the shadow. Through all those doubtful places his

sense of that silent spectator beside him sustained his sincerity. For a few glorious moments he was carried away; he felt no doubt of his heroic quality, no doubt of his heroic words, he had it all straight and plain. His eloquence limped no longer. And at last he made an end to speaking. "Here and now," he cried, "I make my will. All that is mine in the world I give to the people of the world. All that is mine in the world I give to the people of the world. I give it to you, and myself I give to you. And as God wills, I will live for you, or I will die."

He ended with a florid gesture and turned about. He found the light of his present exaltation reflected in the face of the girl. Their eyes met; her eyes were swimming with tears of enthusiasm. They seemed to be urged towards each other. They clasped hands and stood gripped, facing one another, in an eloquent silence. She whispered. "I knew," she whispered. "I knew." He could not speak, he crushed her hand in his. His mind was the theatre of gigantic passions.

The man in yellow was beside them. Neither had noted his coming. He was saying that the south-west wards were marching. "I never expected it so soon," he cried. "They have done wonders. You must send them a word to help them on their way."

Graham dropped Helen's hand and stared at him absent-mindedly. Then with a start he returned to his previous preoccupation about the flying stages.

"Yes," he said. "That is good, that is good." He weighed a message.

"Tell them;--well done South West."

He turned his eyes to Helen Wotton again. His face expressed his struggle between conflicting ideas. "We must capture the flying stages," he explained. "Unless we can do that they will land negroes. At all costs we must prevent that."

He felt even as he spoke that this was not what had been in his mind before the interruption. He saw a touch of surprise in her eyes. She seemed about to speak and a shrill bell drowned her voice.

It occurred to Graham that she expected him to lead these marching people, that that was the thing he had to do. He made the offer abruptly. He addressed the man in yellow, but he spoke to her. He saw her face respond. "Here I am doing nothing," he said.

"It is impossible," protested the man in yellow.

"It is a fight in a warren. Your place is here."

He explained elaborately. He motioned towards the room where Graham must wait, he insisted no other course was possible. "We must know where you are," he said. "At any moment a crisis may arise needing your presence and decision." The room was a luxurious little apartment with news

machines and a broken mirror that had once been en rapport with the crow's nest specula. It seemed a matter of course to Graham that Helen should stop with him.

A picture had drifted through his mind of such a vast dramatic struggle as the masses in the ruins had suggested. But here was no spectacular battle-field such as he imagined. Instead was seclusion--and suspense. It was only as the afternoon wore on that he pieced together a truer picture of the fight that was raging, inaudibly and invisibly, within four miles of him, beneath the Roehampton stage. A strange and unprecedented contest it was, a battle that was a hundred thousand little battles, a battle in a sponge of ways and channels, fought out of sight of sky or sun under the electric glare, fought out in a vast confusion by multitudes untrained in arms, led chiefly by acclamation, multitudes dulled by mindless labour and enervated by the tradition of two hundred years of servile security against multitudes demoralised by lives of venial privilege and sensual indulgence. They had no artillery, no differentiation into this force or that; the only weapon on either side was the little green metal carbine, whose secret manufacture and sudden distribution in enormous quantities had been one of Ostrog's culminating moves against the Council. Few had had any experience with this weapon, many had never discharged one, many who carried it came unprovided with ammunition; never was wilder firing in the history of warfare. It was a battle of amateurs, a hideous experimental warfare, armed rioters fighting armed rioters, armed rioters swept forward by the words and fury of a song, by the tramping sympathy of their numbers,

pouring in countless myriads towards the smaller ways, the disabled lifts, the galleries slippery with blood, the halls and passages choked with smoke, beneath the flying stages, to learn there when retreat was hopeless the ancient mysteries of warfare. And overhead save for a few sharpshooters upon the roof spaces and for a few bands and threads of vapour that multiplied and darkened towards the evening, the day was a clear serenity. Ostrog it seems had no bombs at command and in all the earlier phases of the battle the aeropiles played no part. Not the smallest cloud was there to break the empty brilliance of the sky. It seemed as though it held itself vacant until the aeroplanes should come.

Ever and again there was news of these, drawing nearer, from this Mediterranean port and then that, and presently from the south of France. But of the new guns that Ostrog had made and which were known to be in the city came no news in spite of Graham's urgency, nor any report of successes from the dense felt of fighting strands about the flying stages. Section after section of the Labour Societies reported itself assembled, reported itself marching, and vanished from knowledge into the labyrinth of that warfare. What was happening there? Even the busy ward leaders did not know. In spite of the opening and closing of doors, the hasty messengers, the ringing of bells and the perpetual clitter-clack of recording implements, Graham felt isolated, strangely inactive, inoperative.

Their isolation seemed at times the strangest, the most unexpected of all the things that had happened since his awakening. It had something

of the quality of that inactivity that comes in dreams. A tumult, the stupendous realisation of a world struggle between Ostrog and himself, and then this confined quiet little room with its mouthpieces and bells and broken mirror!

Now the door would be closed and they were alone together; they seemed sharply marked off then from all the unprecedented world storm that rushed together without, vividly aware of one another, only concerned with one another. Then the door would open again, messengers would enter, or a sharp bell would stab their quiet privacy, and it was like a window in a well built brightly lit house flung open suddenly to a hurricane. The dark hurry and tumult, the stress and vehemence of the battle rushed in and overwhelmed them. They were no longer persons but mere spectators, mere impressions of a tremendous convulsion. They became unreal even to themselves, miniatures of personality, indescribably small, and the two antagonistic realities, the only realities in being were first the city, that throbbed and roared yonder in a belated frenzy of defence and secondly the aeroplanes hurling inexorably towards them over the round shoulder of the world.

At first their mood had been one of exalted confidence, a great pride had possessed them, a pride in one another for the greatness of the issues they had challenged. At first he had walked the room eloquent with a transitory persuasion of his tremendous destiny. But slowly uneasy intimations of their coming defeat touched his spirit. There came a long period in which they were alone. He changed his theme, became

egotistical, spoke of the wonder of his sleep, of the little life of his memories, remote yet minute and clear, like something seen through an inverted opera-glass, and all the brief play of desires and errors that had made his former life. She said little, but the emotion in her face followed the tones in his voice, and it seemed to him he had at last a perfect understanding. He reverted from pure reminiscence to that sense of greatness she imposed upon him. "And through it all, this destiny was before me," he said; "this vast inheritance of which I did not dream."

Insensibly their heroic preoccupation with the revolutionary struggle passed to the question of their relationship. He began to question her. She told him of the days before his awakening, spoke with a brief vividness of the girlish dreams that had given a bias to her life, of the incredulous emotions his awakening had aroused. She told him too of a tragic circumstance of her girlhood that had darkened her life, quickened her sense of injustice and opened her heart prematurely to the wider sorrows of the world. For a little time, so far as he was concerned, the great war about them was but the vast ennobling background to these personal things.

In an instant these personal relations were submerged. There came messengers to tell that a great fleet of aeroplanes was rushing between the sky and Avignon. He went to the crystal dial in the corner and assured himself that the thing was so. He went to the chart room and consulted a map to measure the distances of Avignon, New Arawan, and London. He made swift calculations. He went to the room of the Ward

Leaders to ask for news of the fight for the stages--and there was no one there. After a time he came back to her.

His face had changed. It had dawned upon him that the struggle was perhaps more than half over, that Ostrog was holding his own, that the arrival of the aeroplanes would mean a panic that might leave him helpless. A chance phrase in the message had given him a glimpse of the reality that came. Each of these soaring giants bore its thousand half savage negroes to the death grapple of the city. Suddenly his humanitarian enthusiasm showed flimsy. Only two of the Ward Leaders were in their room, when presently he repaired thither, the Hall of the Atlas seemed empty. He fancied a change in the bearing of the attendants in the outer rooms. A sombre disillusionment darkened his mind. She looked at him anxiously when he returned to her.

"No news," he said with an assumed carelessness in answer to her eyes.

Then he was moved to frankness. "Or rather--bad news. We are losing. We are gaining no ground and the aeroplanes draw nearer and nearer."

He walked the length of the room and turned.

"Unless we can capture those flying stages in the next hour--there will be horrible things. We shall be beaten.

"No!" she said. "We have justice--we have the people. We have God on our

side."

"Ostrog has discipline--he has plans. Do you know, out there just now I felt--. When I heard that these aeroplanes were a stage nearer. I felt as if I were fighting the machinery of fate."

She made no answer for a while. "We have done right," she said at last.

He looked at her doubtfully. "We have done what we could. But does this depend upon us? Is it not an older sin, a wider sin?"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"These blacks are savages, ruled by force, used as force. And they have been under the rule of the whites two hundred years. Is it not a race quarrel? The race sinned--the race pays."

"But these labourers, these poor people of London--!"

"Vicarious atonement. To stand wrong is to share the guilt."

She looked keenly at him, astonished at the new aspect he presented.

Without came the shrill ringing of a bell, the sound of feet and the gabble of a phonographic message. The man in yellow appeared. "Yes?" said Graham.

"They are at Vichy."

"Where are the attendants who were in the great Hall of the Atlas?"
asked Graham abruptly.

Presently the Babble Machine rang again. "We may win yet," said the man in yellow, going out to it. "If only we can find where Ostrog has hidden his guns. Everything hangs on that now. Perhaps this--"

Graham followed him. But the only news was of the aeroplanes. They had reached Orleans.

Graham returned to Helen. "No news," he said "No news."

"And we can do nothing?"

"Nothing."

He paced impatiently. Suddenly the swift anger that was his nature swept upon him. "Curse this complex world!" he cried, "and all the inventions of men! That a man must die like a rat in a snare and never see his foe! Oh, for one blow!..."

He turned with an abrupt change in his manner. "That's nonsense," he said. "I am a savage."

He paced and stopped. "After all London and Paris are only two cities. All the temperate zone has risen. What if London is doomed and Paris destroyed? These are but accidents." Again came the mockery of news to call him to fresh enquiries. He returned with a graver face and sat down beside her.

"The end must be near," he said. "The people it seems have fought and died in tens of thousands, the ways about Roehampton must be like a smoked beehive. And they have died in vain. They are still only at the sub stage. The aeroplanes are near Paris. Even were a gleam of success to come now, there would be nothing to do, there would be no time to do anything before they were upon us. The guns that might have saved us are mislaid. Mislaid! Think of the disorder of things! Think of this foolish tumult, that cannot even find its weapons! Oh, for one aeropile--just one! For the want of that I am beaten. Humanity is beaten and our cause is lost! My kingship, my headlong foolish kingship will not last a night. And I have egged on the people to fight--."

"They would have fought anyhow."

"I doubt it. I have come among them--"

"No," she cried, "not that. If defeat comes--if you die--. But even that cannot be, it cannot be, after all these years."

"Ah! We have meant well. But--do you indeed believe--?"

"If they defeat you," she cried, "you have spoken. Your word has gone like a great wind through the world, fanning liberty into a flame. What if the flame sputters a little! Nothing can change the spoken word. Your message will have gone forth...."

"To what end? It may be. It may be. You know I said, when you told me of these things dear God! but that was scarcely a score of hours ago!--I said that I had not your faith. Well--at any rate there is nothing to do now...."

"You have not my faith! Do you mean--? You are sorry?"

"No," he said hurriedly, "no! Before God--no!" His voice changed.

"But--. I think--I have been indiscreet. I knew little--I grasped too hastily...."

He paused. He was ashamed of this avowal. "There is one thing that makes up for all. I have known you. Across this gulf of time I have come to you. The rest is done. It is done. With you, too, it has been something more--or something less--"

He paused with his face searching hers, and without clamoured the unheeded message that the aeroplanes were rising into the sky of Amiens.

She put her hand to her throat, and her lips were white. She stared before her as if she saw some horrible possibility. Suddenly her features changed. "Oh, but I have been honest!" she cried, and then, "Have I been honest? I loved the world and freedom, I hated cruelty and oppression. Surely it was that."

"Yes," he said, "yes. And we have done what it lay in us to do. We have given our message, our message! We have started Armageddon! But now--. Now that we have, it may be our last hour, together, now that all these greater things are done...."

He stopped. She sat in silence. Her face was a white riddle.

For a moment they heeded nothing of a sudden stir outside, a running to and fro, and cries. Then Helen started to an attitude of tense attention. "It is--," she cried and stood up, speechless, incredulous, triumphant. And Graham, too, heard. Metallic voices were shouting "Victory!" Yes it was "Victory!" He stood up also with the light of a desperate hope in his eyes.

Bursting through the curtains appeared the man in yellow, startled and dishevelled with excitement. "Victory," he cried, "victory! The people are winning. Ostrog's people have collapsed."

She rose. "Victory?" And her voice was hoarse and faint.

"What do you mean?" asked Graham. "Tell me! What?"

"We have driven them out of the under galleries at Norwood, Streatham is afire and burning wildly, and Roehampton is ours. Ours!--and we have taken the aeropile that lay thereon."

For an instant Graham and Helen stood in silence, their hearts were beating fast, they looked at one another. For one last moment there gleamed in Graham his dream of empire, of kingship, with Helen by his side. It gleamed, and passed.

A shrill bell rang. An agitated grey-headed man appeared from the room of the Ward Leaders. "It is all over," he cried.

"What matters it now that we have Roehampton? The aeroplanes have been sighted at Boulogne!"

"The Channel!" said the man in yellow. He calculated swiftly. "Half an hour."

"They still have three of the flying stages," said the old man.

"Those guns?" cried Graham.

"We cannot mount them--in half an hour."

"Do you mean they are found?"

"Too late," said the old man.

"If we could stop them another hour!" cried the man in yellow.

"Nothing can stop them now," said the old man, "they have near a hundred aeroplanes in the first fleet."

"Another hour?" asked Graham.

"To be so near!" said the Ward Leader. "Now that we have found those guns. To be so near--. If once we could get them out upon the roof spaces."

"How long would that take?" asked Graham suddenly.

"An hour--certainly."

"Too late," cried the Ward Leader, "too late."

"Is it too late?" said Graham. "Even now--. An hour!"

He had suddenly perceived a possibility. He tried to speak calmly, but his face was white. "There is one chance. You said there was an aeropile--?"

"On the Roehampton stage, Sire."

"Smashed?"

"No. It is lying crossways to the carrier. It might be got upon the guides--easily. But there is no aeronaut--."

Graham glanced at the two men and then at Helen. He spoke after a long pause. "We have no aeronauts?"

"None."

"The aeroplanes are clumsy," he said thoughtfully, "compared with the aeropiles."

He turned suddenly to Helen. His decision was made. "I must do it."

"Do what?"

"Go to this flying stage--to this aeropile."

"What do you mean?"

"I am an aeronaut. After all--. Those days for which you reproached me were not wasted."

He turned to the old man in yellow. "Put the aeropile upon the guides."

The man in yellow hesitated.

"What do you mean to do?" cried Helen.

"This aeropile--it is a chance--."

"You don't mean--?"

"To fight--yes. To fight in the air. I have thought before--. An aeroplane is a clumsy thing. A resolute man--!"

"But--never since flying began--" cried the man in yellow.

"There has been no need. But now the time has come. Tell them now--send them my message--to put it upon the guides."

The old man dumbly interrogated the man in yellow, nodded, and hurried out.

Helen made a step towards Graham. Her face was white. "But--How can one fight? You will be killed."

"Perhaps. Yet, not to do it--or to let someone else attempt it--."

He stopped, he could speak no more, he swept the alternative aside by a gesture, and they stood looking at one another.

"You are right," she said at last in a low tone. "You are right. If it can be done... must go."

Those days for not altogether

He moved a step towards her, and she stepped back, her white face struggled against him and resisted him. "No," she gasped. "I cannot bear--. Go now."

He extended his hands stupidly. She clenched her fists. "Go now," she cried. "Go now."

He hesitated and understood. He threw his hands up in a queer half-theatrical gesture. He had no word to say. He turned from her.

The man in yellow moved towards the door with clumsy belated tact. But Graham stepped past him. He went striding through the room where the Ward Leader bawled at a telephone directing that the aeropile should be put upon the guides.

The man in yellow glanced at Helen's still figure, hesitated and hurried after him. Graham did not once look back, he did not speak until the

curtain of the ante-chamber of the great hall fell behind him. Then he turned his head with curt swift directions upon his bloodless lips.