

CHAPTER IX

THE PEOPLE MARCH

He became aware of someone urging a glass of clear fluid upon his attention, looked up and discovered this was a dark young man in a yellow garment. He took the dose forthwith, and in a moment he was glowing. A tall man in a black robe stood by his shoulder, and pointed to the half open door into the hall. This man was shouting close to his ear and yet what was said was indistinct because of the tremendous uproar from the great theatre. Behind the man was a girl in a silvery grey robe, whom Graham, even in this confusion, perceived to be beautiful. Her dark eyes, full of wonder and curiosity, were fixed on him, her lips trembled apart. A partially opened door gave a glimpse of the crowded hall, and admitted a vast uneven tumult, a hammering, clapping and shouting that died away and began again, and rose to a thunderous pitch, and so continued intermittently all the time that Graham remained in the little room. He watched the lips of the man in black and gathered that he was making some explanation.

He stared stupidly for some moments at these things and then stood up abruptly; he grasped the arm of this shouting person.

"Tell me!" he cried. "Who am I? Who am I?"

The others came nearer to hear his words. "Who am I?" His eyes searched their faces.

"They have told him nothing!" cried the girl.

"Tell me, tell me!" cried Graham.

"You are the Master of the Earth. You are owner of the world."

He did not believe he heard aright. He resisted the persuasion. He pretended not to understand, not to hear. He lifted his voice again. "I have been awake three days--a prisoner three days. I judge there is some struggle between a number of people in this city--it is London?"

"Yes," said the younger man.

"And those who meet in the great hall with the white Atlas? How does it concern me? In some way it has to do with me. Why, I don't know. Drugs? It seems to me that while I have slept the world has gone mad. I have gone mad.... Who are those Councillors under the Atlas? Why should they try to drug me?"

"To keep you insensible," said the man in yellow. "To prevent your interference."

"But why?"

"Because you are the Atlas, Sire," said the man in yellow. "The world is on your shoulders. They rule it in your name."

The sounds from the hall had died into a silence threaded by one monotonous voice. Now suddenly, trampling on these last words, came a deafening tumult, a roaring and thundering, cheer crowded on cheer, voices hoarse and shrill, beating, overlapping, and while it lasted the people in the little room could not hear each other shout.

Graham stood, his intelligence clinging helplessly to the thing he had just heard. "The Council," he repeated blankly, and then snatched at a name that had struck him. "But who is Ostrog?" he said.

"He is the organiser--the organiser of the revolt. Our Leader--in your name."

"In my name?--And you? Why is he not here?"

"He--has deputed us. I am his brother--his half-brother, Lincoln. He wants you to show yourself to these people and then come on to him. That is why he has sent. He is at the wind-vane offices directing. The people are marching."

"In your name," shouted the younger man. "They have ruled, crushed, tyrannised. At last even--"

"In my name! My name! Master?"

The younger man suddenly became audible in a pause of the outer thunder, indignant and vociferous, a high penetrating voice under his red aquiline nose and bushy moustache. "No one expected you to wake. No one expected you to wake. They were cunning. Damned tyrants! But they were taken by surprise. They did not know whether to drug you, hypnotise you, kill you."

Again the hall dominated everything.

"Ostrog is at the wind-vane offices ready--. Even now there is a rumour of fighting beginning."

The man who had called himself Lincoln came close to him. "Ostrog has it planned. Trust him. We have our organisations ready. We shall seize the flying stages--. Even now he may be doing that. Then--"

"This public theatre," bawled the man in yellow, "is only a contingent. We have five myriads of drilled men--"

"We have arms," cried Lincoln. "We have plans. A leader. Their police have gone from the streets and are massed in the--" (inaudible). "It is now or never. The Council is rocking--They cannot trust even their drilled men--"

"Hear the people calling to you!"

Graham's mind was like a night of moon and swift clouds, now dark and hopeless, now clear and ghastly. He was Master of the Earth, he was a man sodden with thawing snow. Of all his fluctuating impressions the dominant ones presented an antagonism; on the one hand was the White Council, powerful, disciplined, few, the White Council from which he had just escaped; and on the other, monstrous crowds, packed masses of indistinguishable people clamouring his name, hailing him Master. The other side had imprisoned him, debated his death. These shouting thousands beyond the little doorway had rescued him. But why these things should be so he could not understand.

The door opened, Lincoln's voice was swept away and drowned, and a rash of people followed on the heels of the tumult. These intruders came towards him and Lincoln gesticulating. The voices without explained their soundless lips. "Show us the Sleeper, show us the Sleeper!" was the burden of the uproar. Men were bawling for "Order! Silence!"

Graham glanced towards the open doorway, and saw a tall, oblong picture of the hall beyond, a waving, incessant confusion of crowded, shouting faces, men and women together, waving pale blue garments, extended hands. Many were standing, one man in rags of dark brown, a gaunt figure, stood on the seat and waved a black cloth. He met the wonder and expectation of the girl's eyes. What did these people expect from him. He was dimly

aware that the tumult outside had changed its character, was in some way beating, marching. His own mind, too, changed. For a space he did not recognise the influence that was transforming him. But a moment that was near to panic passed. He tried to make audible inquiries of what was required of him.

Lincoln was shouting in his ear, but Graham was deafened to that. All the others save the woman gesticulated towards the hall. He perceived what had happened to the uproar. The whole mass of people was chanting together. It was not simply a song, the voices were gathered together and upborne by a torrent of instrumental music, music like the music of an organ, a woven texture of sounds, full of trumpets, full of flaunting banners, full of the march and pageantry of opening war. And the feet of the people were beating time--tramp, tramp.

He was urged towards the door. He obeyed mechanically. The strength of that chant took hold of him, stirred him, emboldened him. The hall opened to him, a vast welter of fluttering colour swaying to the music.

"Wave your arm to them," said Lincoln. "Wave your arm to them."

"This," said a voice on the other side, "he must have this." Arms were about his neck detaining him in the doorway, and a black subtly-folding mantle hung from his shoulders. He threw his arm free of this and followed Lincoln. He perceived the girl in grey close to him, her face lit, her gesture onward. For the instant she became to

him, flushed and eager as she was, an embodiment of the song. He emerged in the alcove again. Incontinently the mounting waves of the song broke upon his appearing, and flashed up into a foam of shouting. Guided by Lincoln's hand he marched obliquely across the centre of the stage facing the people.

The hall was a vast and intricate space--galleries, balconies, broad spaces of amphitheatral steps, and great archways. Far away, high up, seemed the mouth of a huge passage full of struggling humanity. The whole multitude was swaying in congested masses. Individual figures sprang out of the tumult, impressed him momentarily, and lost definition again. Close to the platform swayed a beautiful fair woman, carried by three men, her hair across her face and brandishing a green staff. Next this group an old careworn man in blue canvas maintained his place in the crush with difficulty, and behind shouted a hairless face, a great cavity of toothless mouth. A voice called that enigmatical word "Ostrog." All his impressions were vague save the massive emotion of that trampling song. The multitude were beating time with their feet--marking time, tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp. The green weapons waved, flashed and slanted. Then he saw those nearest to him on a level space before the stage were marching in front of him, passing towards a great archway, shouting "To the Council!" Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp. He raised his arm, and the roaring was redoubled. He remembered he had to shout "March!" His mouth shaped inaudible heroic words. He waved his arm again and pointed to the archway, shouting "Onward!" They were no longer marking time, they were marching; tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp. In that host were bearded men, old

men, youths, fluttering robed bare-armed women, girls. Men and women of the new age! Rich robes, grey rags fluttered together in the whirl of their movement amidst the dominant blue. A monstrous black banner jerked its way to the right. He perceived a blue-clad negro, a shrivelled woman in yellow, then a group of tall fair-haired, white-faced, blue-clad men pushed theatrically past him. He noted two Chinamen. A tall, sallow, dark-haired, shining-eyed youth, white clad from top to toe, clambered up towards the platform shouting loyally, and sprang down again and receded, looking backward. Heads, shoulders, hands clutching weapons, all were swinging with those marching cadences.

Faces came out of the confusion to him as he stood there, eyes met his and passed and vanished. Men gesticulated to him, shouted inaudible personal things. Most of the faces were flushed, but many were ghastly white. And disease was there, and many a hand that waved to him was gaunt and lean. Men and women of the new age! Strange and incredible meeting! As the broad stream passed before him to the right, tributary gangways from the remote uplands of the hall thrust downward in an incessant replacement of people; tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp. The unison of the song was enriched and complicated by the massive echoes of arches and passages. Men and women mingled in the ranks; tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp. The whole world seemed marching. Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp; his brain was tramping. The garments waved onward, the faces poured by more abundantly.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp; at Lincoln's pressure he turned towards the

archway, walking unconsciously in that rhythm, scarcely noticing his movement for the melody and stir of it. The multitude, the gesture and song, all moved in that direction, the flow of people smote downward until the upturned faces were below the level of his feet. He was aware of a path before him, of a suite about him, of guards and dignities, and Lincoln on his right hand. Attendants intervened, and ever and again blotted out the sight of the multitude to the left. Before him went the backs of the guards in black--three and three and three. He was marched along a little railed way, and crossed above the archway, with the torrent dipping to flow beneath, and shouting up to him. He did not know whither he went; he did not want to know. He glanced back across a flaming spaciousness of hall. Tramp, tramp, tramp, tramp.