

CHAPTER XV

PROMINENT PEOPLE

The state apartments of the Wind Vane Keeper would have astonished Graham had he entered them fresh from his nineteenth century life, but already he was growing accustomed to the scale of the new time. He came out through one of the now familiar sliding panels upon a plateau of landing at the head of a flight of very broad and gentle steps, with men and women far more brilliantly dressed than any he had hitherto seen, ascending and descending. From this position he looked down a vista of subtle and varied ornament in lustreless white and mauve and purple, spanned by bridges that seemed wrought of porcelain and filigree, and terminating far off in a cloudy mystery of perforated screens.

Glancing upward, he saw tier above tier of ascending galleries with faces looking down upon him. The air was full of the babble of innumerable voices and of a music that descended from above, a gay and exhilarating music whose source he did not discover.

The central aisle was thick with people, but by no means uncomfortably crowded; altogether that assembly must have numbered many thousands. They were brilliantly, even fantastically dressed, the men as fancifully as the women, for the sobering influence of the Puritan conception of dignity upon masculine dress had long since passed away. The hair of the

men, too, though it was rarely worn long, was commonly curled in a manner that suggested the barber, and baldness had vanished from the earth. Frizzy straight-cut masses that would have charmed Rossetti abounded, and one gentleman, who was pointed out to Graham under the mysterious title of an "amorist," wore his hair in two becoming plaits à la Marguerite. The pigtail was in evidence; it would seem that citizens of Chinese extraction were no longer ashamed of their race. There was little uniformity of fashion apparent in the forms of clothing worn. The more shapely men displayed their symmetry in trunk hose, and here were puffs and slashes, and there a cloak and there a robe. The fashions of the days of Leo the Tenth were perhaps the prevailing influence, but the aesthetic conceptions of the far east were also patent. Masculine embonpoint, which, in Victorian times, would have been subjected to the buttoned perils, the ruthless exaggeration of tight-legged tight-armed evening dress, now formed but the basis of a wealth of dignity and drooping folds. Graceful slenderness abounded also. To Graham, a typically stiff man from a typically stiff period, not only did these men seem altogether too graceful in person, but altogether too expressive in their vividly expressive faces. They gesticulated, they expressed surprise, interest, amusement, above all, they expressed the emotions excited in their minds by the ladies about them with astonishing frankness. Even at the first glance it was evident that women were in a great majority.

The ladies in the company of these gentlemen displayed in dress, bearing and manner alike, less emphasis and more intricacy. Some affected a

classical simplicity of robing and subtlety of fold, after the fashion of the First French Empire, and flashed conquering arms and shoulders as Graham passed. Others had closely-fitting dresses without seam or belt at the waist, sometimes with long folds falling from the shoulders. The delightful confidences of evening dress had not been diminished by the passage of two centuries.

Everyone's movements seemed graceful. Graham remarked to Lincoln that he saw men as Raphael's cartoons walking, and Lincoln told him that the attainment of an appropriate set of gestures was part of every rich person's education. The Master's entry was greeted with a sort of tittering applause, but these people showed their distinguished manners by not crowding upon him nor annoying him by any persistent scrutiny, as he descended the steps towards the floor of the aisle.

He had already learnt from Lincoln that these were the leaders of existing London society; almost every person there that night was either a powerful official or the immediate connexion of a powerful official. Many had returned from the European Pleasure Cities expressly to welcome him. The aeronautic authorities, whose defection had played a part in the overthrow of the Council only second to Graham's, were very prominent, and so, too, was the Wind Vane Control. Amongst others there were several of the more prominent officers of the Food Department; the controller of the European Piggeries had a particularly melancholy and interesting countenance and a daintily cynical manner. A bishop in full canonicals passed athwart Graham's vision, conversing with a gentleman dressed

exactly like the traditional Chaucer, including even the laurel wreath.

"Who is that?" he asked almost involuntarily.

"The Bishop of London," said Lincoln.

"No--the other, I mean."

"Poet Laureate."

"You still--?"

"He doesn't make poetry, of course. He's a cousin of Wotton--one of the Councillors. But he's one of the Red Rose Royalists--a delightful club--and they keep up the tradition of these things."

"Asano told me there was a King."

"The King doesn't belong. They had to expel him. It's the Stuart blood, I suppose; but really--"

"Too much?"

"Far too much."

Graham did not quite follow all this, but it seemed part of the general

inversion of the new age. He bowed condescendingly to his first introduction. It was evident that subtle distinctions of class prevailed even in this assembly, that only to a small proportion of the guests, to an inner group, did Lincoln consider it appropriate to introduce him. This first introduction was the Master Aeronaut, a man whose sun-tanned face contrasted oddly with the delicate complexions about him. Just at present his critical defection from the Council made him a very important person indeed.

His manner contrasted very favourably, according to Graham's ideas, with the general bearing. He offered a few commonplace remarks, assurances of loyalty and frank inquiries about the Master's health. His manner was breezy, his accent lacked the easy staccato of latter-day English. He made it admirably clear to Graham that he was a bluff "aerial dog"--he used that phrase--that there was no nonsense about him, that he was a thoroughly manly fellow and old-fashioned at that, that he didn't profess to know much, and that what he did not know was not worth knowing. He made a curt bow, ostentatiously free from obsequiousness, and passed.

"I am glad to see that type endures," said Graham.

"Phonographs and kinematographs," said Lincoln, a little spitefully. "He has studied from the life." Graham glanced at the burly form again. It was oddly reminiscent.

"As a matter of fact we bought him," said Lincoln. "Partly. And partly he

was afraid of Ostrog. Everything rested with him."

He turned sharply to introduce the Surveyor-General of the Public Schools. This person was a willowy figure in a blue-grey academic gown, he beamed down upon Graham through pince-nez of a Victorian pattern, and illustrated his remarks by gestures of a beautifully manicured hand. Graham was immediately interested in this gentleman's functions, and asked him a number of singularly direct questions. The Surveyor-General seemed quietly amused at the Master's fundamental bluntness. He was a little vague as to the monopoly of education his Company possessed; it was done by contract with the syndicate that ran the numerous London Municipalities, but he waxed enthusiastic over educational progress since the Victorian times. "We have conquered Cram," he said, "completely conquered Cram--there is not an examination left in the world. Aren't you glad?"

"How do you get the work done?" asked Graham.

"We make it attractive--as attractive as possible. And if it does not attract then--we let it go. We cover an immense field."

He proceeded to details, and they had a lengthy conversation. Graham learnt that University Extension still existed in a modified form. "There is a certain type of girl, for example," said the Surveyor-General, dilating with a sense of his usefulness, "with a perfect passion for severe studies--when they are not too difficult you know. We cater for

them by the thousand. At this moment," he said with a Napoleonic touch, "nearly five hundred phonographs are lecturing in different parts of London on the influence exercised by Plato and Swift on the love affairs of Shelley, Hazlitt, and Burns. And afterwards they write essays on the lectures, and the names in order of merit are put in conspicuous places. You see how your little germ has grown? The illiterate middle-class of your days has quite passed away."

"About the public elementary schools," said Graham. "Do you control them?"

The Surveyor-General did, "entirely." Now, Graham, in his later democratic days, had taken a keen interest in these and his questioning quickened. Certain casual phrases that had fallen from the old man with whom he had talked in the darkness recurred to him. The Surveyor-General, in effect, endorsed the old man's words. "We try and make the elementary schools very pleasant for the little children. They will have to work so soon. Just a few simple principles--obedience--industry."

"You teach them very little?"

"Why should we? It only leads to trouble and discontent. We amuse them. Even as it is--there are troubles--agitations. Where the labourers get the ideas, one cannot tell. They tell one another. There are socialistic dreams--anarchy even! Agitators will get to work among them. I take it--I have always taken it--that my foremost duty is to fight against

popular discontent. Why should people be made unhappy?"

"I wonder," said Graham thoughtfully. "But there are a great many things I want to know."

Lincoln, who had stood watching Graham's face throughout the conversation, intervened. "There are others," he said in an undertone.

The Surveyor-General of schools gesticulated himself away. "Perhaps," said Lincoln, intercepting a casual glance, "you would like to know some of these ladies?"

The daughter of the Manager of the Piggeries was a particularly charming little person with red hair and animated blue eyes. Lincoln left him awhile to converse with her, and she displayed herself as quite an enthusiast for the "dear old days," as she called them, that had seen the beginning of his trance. As she talked she smiled, and her eyes smiled in a manner that demanded reciprocity.

"I have tried," she said, "countless times--to imagine those old romantic days. And to you--they are memories. How strange and crowded the world must seem to you! I have seen photographs and pictures of the past, the little isolated houses built of bricks made out of burnt mud and all black with soot from your fires, the railway bridges, the simple advertisements, the solemn savage Puritanical men in strange black coats and those tall hats of theirs, iron railway trains on iron bridges

overhead, horses and cattle, and even dogs running half wild about the streets. And suddenly, you have come into this!"

"Into this," said Graham.

"Out of your life--out of all that was familiar."

"The old life was not a happy one," said Graham. "I do not regret that."

She looked at him quickly. There was a brief pause. She sighed encouragingly. "No?"

"No," said Graham. "It was a little life--and unmeaning. But this--We thought the world complex and crowded and civilised enough. Yet I see--although in this world I am barely four days old--looking back on my own time, that it was a queer, barbaric time--the mere beginning of this new order. The mere beginning of this new order. You will find it hard to understand how little I know."

"You may ask me what you like," she said, smiling at him.

"Then tell me who these people are. I'm still very much in the dark about them. It's puzzling. Are there any Generals?"

"Men in hats and feathers?"

"Of course not. No. I suppose they are the men who control the great public businesses. Who is that distinguished looking man?"

"That? He's a most important officer. That is Morden. He is managing director of the Antibilious Pill Department. I have heard that his workers sometimes turn out a myriad myriad pills a day in the twenty-four hours. Fancy a myriad myriad!"

"A myriad myriad. No wonder he looks proud," said Graham. "Pills! What a wonderful time it is! That man in purple?"

"He is not quite one of the inner circle, you know. But we like him. He is really clever and very amusing. He is one of the heads of the Medical Faculty of our London University. All medical men, you know, wear that purple. But, of course, people who are paid by fees for doing something--" She smiled away the social pretensions of all such people.

"Are any of your great artists or authors here?"

"No authors. They are mostly such queer people--and so preoccupied about themselves. And they quarrel so dreadfully! They will fight, some of them, for precedence on staircases! Dreadful, isn't it? But I think Wraysbury, the fashionable capillotomist, is here. From Capri."

"Capillotomist," said Graham. "Ah! I remember. An artist! Why not?"

"We have to cultivate him," she said apologetically. "Our heads are in his hands." She smiled.

Graham hesitated at the invited compliment, but his glance was expressive. "Have the arts grown with the rest of civilised things?" he said. "Who are your great painters?"

She looked at him doubtfully. Then laughed. "For a moment," she said, "I thought you meant--" She laughed again. "You mean, of course, those good men you used to think so much of because they could cover great spaces of canvas with oil-colours? Great oblongs. And people used to put the things in gilt frames and hang them up in rows in their square rooms. We haven't any. People grew tired of that sort of thing."

"But what did you think I meant?"

She put a finger significantly on a cheek whose glow was above suspicion, and smiled and looked very arch and pretty and inviting. "And here," and she indicated her eyelid.

Graham had an adventurous moment. Then a grotesque memory of a picture he had somewhere seen of Uncle Toby and the widow flashed across his mind. An archaic shame came upon him. He became acutely aware that he was visible to a great number of interested people. "I see," he remarked inadequately. He turned awkwardly away from her fascinating facility. He looked about him to meet a number of eyes that immediately occupied

themselves with other things. Possibly he coloured a little. "Who is that talking with the lady in saffron?" he asked, avoiding her eyes.

The person in question he learnt was one of the great organisers of the American theatres just fresh from a gigantic production at Mexico. His face reminded Graham of a bust of Caligula. Another striking looking man was the Black Labour Master. The phrase at the time made no deep impression, but afterwards it recurred;--the Black Labour Master? The little lady in no degree embarrassed, pointed out to him a charming little woman as one of the subsidiary wives of the Anglican Bishop of London. She added encomiums on the episcopal courage--hitherto there had been a rule of clerical monogamy--"neither a natural nor an expedient condition of things. Why should the natural development of the affections be dwarfed and restricted because a man is a priest?"

"And, bye the bye," she added, "are you an Anglican?" Graham was on the verge of hesitating inquiries about the status of a "subsidiary wife," apparently an euphemistic phrase, when Lincoln's return broke off this very suggestive and interesting conversation. They crossed the aisle to where a tall man in crimson, and two charming persons in Burmese costume (as it seemed to him) awaited him diffidently. From their civilities he passed to other presentations.

In a little while his multitudinous impressions began to organise themselves into a general effect. At first the glitter of the gathering had raised all the democrat in Graham; he had felt hostile and satirical.

But it is not in human nature to resist an atmosphere of courteous regard. Soon the music, the light, the play of colours, the shining arms and shoulders about him, the touch of hands, the transient interest of smiling faces, the frothing sound of skilfully modulated voices, the atmosphere of compliment, interest and respect, had woven together into a fabric of indisputable pleasure. Graham for a time forgot his spacious resolutions. He gave way insensibly to the intoxication of the position that was conceded him, his manner became more convincingly regal, his feet walked assuredly, the black robe fell with a bolder fold and pride ennobled his voice. After all, this was a brilliant interesting world.

He looked up and saw passing across a bridge of porcelain and looking down upon him, a face that was almost immediately hidden, the face of the girl he had seen overnight in the little room beyond the theatre after his escape from the Council. And she was watching him.

For the moment he did not remember when he had seen her, and then came a vague memory of the stirring emotions of their first encounter. But the dancing web of melody about him kept the air of that great marching song from his memory.

The lady to whom he talked repeated her remark, and Graham recalled himself to the quasi-regal flirtation upon which he was engaged.

Yet, unaccountably, a vague restlessness, a feeling that grew to dissatisfaction, came into his mind. He was troubled as if by some half

forgotten duty, by the sense of things important slipping from him amidst this light and brilliance. The attraction that these ladies who crowded about him were beginning to exercise ceased. He no longer gave vague and clumsy responses to the subtly amorous advances that he was now assured were being made to him, and his eyes wandered for another sight of the girl of the first revolt.

Where, precisely, had he seen her?...

Graham was in one of the upper galleries in conversation with a bright-eyed lady on the subject of Eadhamite--the subject was his choice and not hers. He had interrupted her warm assurances of personal devotion with a matter-of-fact inquiry. He found her, as he had already found several other latter-day women that night, less well informed than charming. Suddenly, struggling against the eddying drift of nearer melody, the song of the Revolt, the great song he had heard in the Hall, hoarse and massive, came beating down to him.

Ah! Now he remembered!

He glanced up startled, and perceived above him an oeil de boeuf through which this song had come, and beyond, the upper courses of cable, the blue haze, and the pendant fabric of the lights of the public ways.

He heard the song break into a tumult of voices and cease. He perceived quite clearly the drone and tumult of the moving platforms and a murmur of many people. He had a vague persuasion that he could not account for,

a sort of instinctive feeling that outside in the ways a huge crowd must be watching this place in which their Master amused himself.

Though the song had stopped so abruptly, though the special music of this gathering reasserted itself, the motif of the marching song, once it had begun, lingered in his mind.

The bright-eyed lady was still struggling with the mysteries of Eadhamite when he perceived the girl he had seen in the theatre again. She was coming now along the gallery towards him; he saw her first before she saw him. She was dressed in a faintly luminous grey, her dark hair about her brows was like a cloud, and as he saw her the cold light from the circular opening into the ways fell upon her downcast face.

The lady in trouble about the Eadhamite saw the change in his expression, and grasped her opportunity to escape. "Would you care to know that girl, Sire?" she asked boldly. "She is Helen Wotton--a niece of Ostrog's. She knows a great many serious things. She is one of the most serious persons alive. I am sure you will like her."

In another moment Graham was talking to the girl, and the bright-eyed lady had fluttered away.

"I remember you quite well," said Graham. "You were in that little room. When all the people were singing and beating time with their feet. Before I walked across the Hall."

Her momentary embarrassment passed. She looked up at him, and her face was steady. "It was wonderful," she said, hesitated, and spoke with a sudden effort. "All those people would have died for you, Sire. Countless people did die for you that night."

Her face glowed. She glanced swiftly aside to see that no other heard her words.

Lincoln appeared some way off along the gallery, making his way through the press towards them. She saw him and turned to Graham strangely eager, with a swift change to confidence and intimacy. "Sire," she said quickly, "I cannot tell you now and here. But the common people are very unhappy; they are oppressed--they are misgoverned. Do not forget the people, who faced death--death that you might live."

"I know nothing--" began Graham.

"I cannot tell you now."

Lincoln's face appeared close to them. He bowed an apology to the girl.

"You find the new world amusing, Sire?" asked Lincoln, with smiling deference, and indicating the space and splendour of the gathering by one comprehensive gesture. "At any rate, you find it changed."

"Yes," said Graham, "changed. And yet, after all, not so greatly changed."

"Wait till you are in the air," said Lincoln. "The wind has fallen; even now an aeroplane awaits you."

The girl's attitude awaited dismissal.

Graham glanced at her face, was on the verge of a question, found a warning in her expression, bowed to her and turned to accompany Lincoln.