

CHAPTER XIX

OSTROG'S POINT OF VIEW

Graham found Ostrog waiting to give a formal account of his day's stewardship. On previous occasions he had passed over this ceremony as speedily as possible, in order to resume his aerial experiences, but now he began to ask quick short questions. He was very anxious to take up his empire forthwith. Ostrog brought flattering reports of the development of affairs abroad. In Paris and Berlin, Graham perceived that he was saying, there had been trouble, not organised resistance indeed, but insubordinate proceedings. "After all these years," said Ostrog, when Graham pressed enquiries; "the Commune has lifted its head again. That is the real nature of the struggle, to be explicit." But order had been restored in these cities. Graham, the more deliberately judicial for the stirring emotions he felt, asked if there had been any fighting. "A little," said Ostrog. "In one quarter only. But the Senegalese division of our African agricultural police--the Consolidated African Companies have a very well drilled police--was ready, and so were the aeroplanes. We expected a little trouble in the continental cities, and in America. But things are very quiet in America. They are satisfied with the overthrow of the Council. For the time."

"Why should you expect trouble?" asked Graham abruptly.

"There is a lot of discontent--social discontent."

"The Labour Department?"

"You are learning," said Ostrog with a touch of surprise. "Yes. It is chiefly the discontent with the Labour Department. It was that discontent supplied the motive force of this overthrow--that and your awakening."

"Yes?"

Ostrog smiled. He became explicit. "We had to stir up their discontent, we had to revive the old ideals of universal happiness--all men equal--all men happy--no luxury that everyone may not share--ideas that have slumbered for two hundred years. You know that? We had to revive these ideals, impossible as they are--in order to overthrow the Council. And now--"

"Well?"

"Our revolution is accomplished, and the Council is overthrown, and people whom we have stirred up--remain surging. There was scarcely enough fighting.... We made promises, of course. It is extraordinary how violently and rapidly this vague out-of-date humanitarianism has revived and spread. We who sowed the seed even, have been astonished. In Paris, as I say--we have had to call in a little external help."

"And here?"

"There is trouble. Multitudes will not go back to work. There is a general strike. Half the factories are empty and the people are swarming in the ways. They are talking of a Commune. Men in silk and satin have been insulted in the streets. The blue canvas is expecting all sorts of things from you.... Of course there is no need for you to trouble. We are setting the Babble Machines to work with counter suggestions in the cause of law and order. We must keep the grip tight; that is all."

Graham thought. He perceived a way of asserting himself. But he spoke with restraint.

"Even to the pitch of bringing a negro police," he said.

"They are useful," said Ostrog. "They are fine loyal brutes, with no wash of ideas in their heads--such as our rabble has. The Council should have had them as police of the ways, and things might have been different. Of course, there is nothing to fear except rioting and wreckage. You can manage your own wings now, and you can soar away to Capri if there is any smoke or fuss. We have the pull of all the great things; the aeronauts are privileged and rich, the closest trades union in the world, and so are the engineers of the wind-vanes. We have the air, and the mastery of the air is the mastery of the earth. No one of any ability is organising against us. They have no leaders--only the sectional leaders of the secret society we organised before your very opportune awakening. Mere

busybodies and sentimentalists they are and bitterly jealous of each other. None of them is man enough for a central figure. The only trouble will be a disorganised upheaval. To be frank--that may happen. But it won't interrupt your aeronautics. The days when the People could make revolutions are past."

"I suppose they are," said Graham. "I suppose they are." He mused. "This world of yours has been full of surprises to me. In the old days we dreamt of a wonderful democratic life, of a time when all men would be equal and happy."

Ostrog looked at him steadfastly. "The day of democracy is past," he said. "Past for ever. That day began with the bowmen of Creçy, it ended when marching infantry, when common men in masses ceased to win the battles of the world, when costly cannon, great ironclads, and strategic railways became the means of power. To-day is the day of wealth. Wealth now is power as it never was power before--it commands earth and sea and sky. All power is for those who can handle wealth. On your behalf.... You must accept facts, and these are facts. The world for the Crowd! The Crowd as Ruler! Even in your days that creed had been tried and condemned. To-day it has only one believer--a multiplex, silly one--the man in the Crowd."

Graham did not answer immediately. He stood lost in sombre preoccupations.

"No," said Ostrog. "The day of the common man is past. On the open countryside one man is as good as another, or nearly as good. The earlier aristocracy had a precarious tenure of strength and audacity. They were tempered--tempered. There were insurrections, duels, riots. The first real aristocracy, the first permanent aristocracy, came in with castles and armour, and vanished before the musket and bow. But this is the second aristocracy. The real one. Those days of gunpowder and democracy were only an eddy in the stream. The common man now is a helpless unit. In these days we have this great machine of the city, and an organisation complex beyond his understanding."

"Yet," said Graham, "there is something resists, something you are holding down--something that stirs and presses."

"You will see," said Ostrog, with a forced smile that would brush these difficult questions aside. "I have not roused the force to destroy myself--trust me."

"I wonder," said Graham.

Ostrog stared.

"Must the world go this way?" said Graham with his emotions at the speaking point. "Must it indeed go in this way? Have all our hopes been vain?"

"What do you mean?" said Ostrog. "Hopes?"

"I come from a democratic age. And I find an aristocratic tyranny!"

"Well,--but you are the chief tyrant."

Graham shook his head.

"Well," said Ostrog, "take the general question. It is the way that change has always travelled. Aristocracy, the prevalence of the best--the suffering and extinction of the unfit, and so to better things."

"But aristocracy! those people I met--"

"Oh! not those!" said Ostrog. "But for the most part they go to their death. Vice and pleasure! They have no children. That sort of stuff will die out. If the world keeps to one road, that is, if there is no turning back. An easy road to excess, convenient Euthanasia for the pleasure seekers singed in the flame, that is the way to improve the race!"

"Pleasant extinction," said Graham. "Yet--." He thought for an instant.

"There is that other thing--the Crowd, the great mass of poor men. Will that die out? That will not die out. And it suffers, its suffering is a force that even you--"

Ostrog moved impatiently, and when he spoke, he spoke rather less evenly

than before.

"Don't trouble about these things," he said. "Everything will be settled in a few days now. The Crowd is a huge foolish beast. What if it does not die out? Even if it does not die, it can still be tamed and driven. I have no sympathy with servile men. You heard those people shouting and singing two nights ago. They were taught that song. If you had taken any man there in cold blood and asked why he shouted, he could not have told you. They think they are shouting for you, that they are loyal and devoted to you. Just then they were ready to slaughter the Council. To-day--they are already murmuring against those who have overthrown the Council."

"No, no," said Graham. "They shouted because their lives were dreary, without joy or pride, and because in me--in me--they hoped."

"And what was their hope? What is their hope? What right have they to hope? They work ill and they want the reward of those who work well. The hope of mankind--what is it? That some day the Over-man may come, that some day the inferior, the weak and the bestial may be subdued or eliminated. Subdued if not eliminated. The world is no place for the bad, the stupid, the enervated. Their duty--it's a fine duty too!--is to die. The death of the failure! That is the path by which the beast rose to manhood, by which man goes on to higher things."

Ostrog took a pace, seemed to think, and turned on Graham. "I can imagine

how this great world state of ours seems to a Victorian Englishman. You regret all the old forms of representative government--their spectres still haunt the world, the voting councils, and parliaments and all that eighteenth century tomfoolery. You feel moved against our Pleasure Cities. I might have thought of that,--had I not been busy. But you will learn better. The people are mad with envy--they would be in sympathy with you. Even in the streets now, they clamour to destroy the Pleasure Cities. But the Pleasure Cities are the excretory organs of the State, attractive places that year after year draw together all that is weak and vicious, all that is lascivious and lazy, all the easy roguery of the world, to a graceful destruction. They go there, they have their time, they die childless, all the pretty silly lascivious women die childless, and mankind is the better. If the people were sane they would not envy the rich their way of death. And you would emancipate the silly brainless workers that we have enslaved, and try to make their lives easy and pleasant again. Just as they have sunk to what they are fit for." He smiled a smile that irritated Graham oddly. "You will learn better. I know those ideas; in my boyhood I read your Shelley and dreamt of Liberty. There is no liberty, save wisdom and self-control. Liberty is within--not without. It is each man's own affair. Suppose--which is impossible--that these swarming yelping fools in blue get the upper hand of us, what then? They will only fall to other masters. So long as there are sheep Nature will insist on beasts of prey. It would mean but a few hundred years' delay. The coming of the aristocrat is fatal and assured. The end will be the Over-man--for all the mad protests of humanity. Let them revolt, let them win and kill me and my like. Others will

arise--other masters. The end will be the same."

"I wonder," said Graham doggedly.

For a moment he stood downcast.

"But I must see these things for myself," he said, suddenly assuming a tone of confident mastery. "Only by seeing can I understand. I must learn. That is what I want to tell you, Ostrog. I do not want to be King in a Pleasure City; that is not my pleasure. I have spent enough time with aeronautics--and those other things. I must learn how people live now, how the common life has developed. Then I shall understand these things better. I must learn how common people live--the labour people more especially--how they work, marry, bear children, die--"

"You get that from our realistic novelists," suggested Ostrog, suddenly preoccupied.

"I want reality," said Graham.

"There are difficulties," said Ostrog, and thought. "On the whole--"

"I did not expect--"

"I had thought--. And yet perhaps--. You say you want to go through the ways of the city and see the common people."

Suddenly he came to some conclusion. "You would need to go disguised," he said. "The city is intensely excited, and the discovery of your presence among them might create a fearful tumult. Still this wish of yours to go into this city--this idea of yours--. Yes, now I think the thing over, it seems to me not altogether--. It can be contrived. If you would really find an interest in that! You are, of course, Master. You can go soon if you like. A disguise Asano will be able to manage. He would go with you. After all it is not a bad idea of yours."

"You will not want to consult me in any matter?" asked Graham suddenly, struck by an odd suspicion.

"Oh, dear no! No! I think you may trust affairs to me for a time, at any rate," said Ostrog, smiling. "Even if we differ--"

Graham glanced at him sharply.

"There is no fighting likely to happen soon?" he asked abruptly.

"Certainly not."

"I have been thinking about these negroes. I don't believe the people intend any hostility to me, and, after all, I am the Master. I do not want any negroes brought to London. It is an archaic prejudice perhaps, but I have peculiar feelings about Europeans and the subject races. Even

about Paris--"

Ostrog stood watching him from under his drooping brows. "I am not bringing negroes to London," he said slowly. "But if--"

"You are not to bring armed negroes to London, whatever happens," said Graham. "In that matter I am quite decided."

Ostrog resolved not to speak, and bowed deferentially.