

CHAPTER XXIII

GRAHAM SPEAKS HIS WORD

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 negroes 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 men 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 withdrawal from that contagious crowd, this 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 All his supports seemed withdrawn together; he seemed to have dropped into this suddenly, suddenly to have discovered himself.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 Madrid.

"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 Madrid! They must have started before the main fleet.

"Oh! what can 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 indiscreet 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. Graham turned, and the watching lights waned.

Through the open doorway he saw a slight girlish figure approaching. His heart leapt. It was Helen Wotton. 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.

She came in very quietly, and stood still, as if she did not want to interrupt Graham's eloquence.... But his doubts and questionings 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 back to her.

"You have helped me," he said lamely--"helped me very much.... This is very difficult."

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. He wished passionately for the gift of moving speech.

"This night is a beginning," he said. "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. I think I may be 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 girl 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?

"Charity and mercy," he floundered; "beauty and the love of beautiful things--effort and devotion! Give yourselves as I would give myself--as Christ gave Himself upon the Cross. It does not matter if you understand. It does not matter if you seem to fail. You know--in the core of your hearts you know. There is no promise, there is no security--nothing to go upon but Faith. There is no faith but faith--faith which is courage...."

Things that he had long wished to believe, he found that he believed. 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 as he spoke, dim attendants watched him out of the shadow....

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. To all of you. I give it to you, and myself I give to you. And as God wills to-night, I will live for you, or I will die."

He ended. 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.

"I knew," she whispered. "Oh! Father of the World--Sire! I knew you would say these things...."

"I have said what I could," he answered lamely and grasped and clung to her outstretched hands.