

CHAPTER XXIV

WHILE THE AEROPLANES WERE COMING

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 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."

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 flying machines 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 Spanish town and then that, and presently from 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.

His 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 Graham and Helen 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.

There came a sudden stir outside, a running to and fro, and cries. The girl stood up, speechless, incredulous.

Metallic voices were shouting "Victory!" Yes it was "Victory!"

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?"

"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 monoplane that lay thereon."

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 are chance. You said there was a monoplane--?"

"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."

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

"Do what?"

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

"What do you mean?"

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

He turned to the old man in yellow. "Tell them to put it upon the guides."

The man in yellow hesitated.

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

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

"You don't mean--?"

"To fight--yes. To fight in the air. I have thought before--. A big 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. I see now something to do. I see now why I am here!"

The old man dumbly interrogated the man in yellow nodded, and

hurried out.

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

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

"You will be killed," she repeated.

"I've said my word. Do you not see? It may save--London!"

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

They were both clear that he must go. There was no step back from these towering heroisms.

Her eyes brimmed with tears. She came towards him with a curious movement of her hands, as though she felt her way and could not see; she seized his hand and kissed it.

"To wake," she cried, "for this!"

He held her clumsily for a moment, and kissed the hair of her bowed head, and then thrust her away, and turned towards the man in yellow.

He could not speak. The gesture of his arm said "Onward."