

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

THE GIANT LEAGUER.

I.

Presently Redwood found himself in a train going south over the Thames. He had a brief vision of the river shining under its lights, and of the smoke still going up from the place where the shell had fallen on the north bank, and where a vast multitude of men had been organised to burn the Herakleophorbia out of the ground. The southern bank was dark, for some reason even the streets were not lit, all that was clearly visible was the outlines of the tall alarm-towers and the dark bulks of flats and schools, and after a minute of peering scrutiny he turned his back on the window and sank into thought. There was nothing more to see or do until he saw the Sons....

He was fatigued by the stresses of the last two days; it seemed to him that his emotions must needs be exhausted, but he had fortified himself with strong coffee before starting, and his thoughts ran thin and clear. His mind touched many things. He reviewed again, but now in the enlightenment of accomplished events, the manner in which the Food had entered and unfolded itself in the world.

"Bensington thought it might be an excellent food for infants," he

whispered to himself, with a faint smile. Then there came into his mind as vivid as if they were still unsettled his own horrible doubts after he had committed himself by giving it to his own son. From that, with a steady unfaltering expansion, in spite of every effort of men to help and hinder, the Food had spread through the whole world of man. And now?

"Even if they kill them all," Redwood whispered, "the thing is done."

The secret of its making was known far and wide. That had been his own work. Plants, animals, a multitude of distressful growing children would conspire irresistibly to force the world to revert again to the Food, whatever happened in the present struggle. "The thing is done," he said, with his mind swinging round beyond all his controlling to rest upon the present fate of the Children and his son. Would he find them exhausted by the efforts of the battle, wounded, starving, on the verge of defeat, or would he find them still stout and hopeful, ready for the still grimmer conflict of the morrow? His son was wounded! But he had sent a message!

His mind came back to his interview with Caterham.

He was roused from his thoughts by the stopping of his train in Chislehurst station. He recognised the place by the huge rat alarm-tower that crested Camden Hill, and the row of blossoming giant hemlocks that lined the road....

Caterham's private secretary came to him from the other carriage and told him that half a mile farther the line had been wrecked, and that the rest of the journey was to be made in a motor car. Redwood descended upon a platform lit only by a hand lantern and swept by the cool night breeze. The quiet of that derelict, wood-set, weed-embedded suburb--for all the inhabitants had taken refuge in London at the outbreak of yesterday's conflict--became instantly impressive. His conductor took him down the steps to where a motor car was waiting with blazing lights--the only lights to be seen--handed him over to the care of the driver and bade him farewell.

"You will do your best for us," he said, with an imitation of his master's manner, as he held Redwood's hand.

So soon as Redwood could be wrapped about they started out into the night. At one moment they stood still, and then the motor car was rushing softly and swiftly down the station incline. They turned one corner and another, followed the windings of a lane of villas, and then before them stretched the road. The motor droned up to its topmost speed, and the black night swept past them. Everything was very dark under the starlight, and the whole world crouched mysteriously and was gone without a sound. Not a breath stirred the flying things by the wayside; the deserted, pallid white villas on either hand, with their black unlit windows, reminded him of a noiseless procession of skulls. The driver beside him was a silent man, or stricken into silence by the conditions of his journey. He answered Redwood's brief questions in

monosyllables, and gruffly. Athwart the southern sky the beams of searchlights waved noiseless passes; the sole strange evidences of life they seemed in all that derelict world about the hurrying machine.

The road was presently bordered on either side by gigantic blackthorn shoots that made it very dark, and by tail grass and big champions, huge giant dead-nettles as high as trees, flickering past darkly in silhouette overhead. Beyond Keston they came to a rising hill, and the driver went slow. At the crest he stopped. The engine throbbed and became still. "There," he said, and his big gloved finger pointed, a black misshapen thing before Redwood's eyes.

Far away as it seemed, the great embankment, crested by the blaze from which the searchlights sprang, rose up against the sky. Those beams went and came among the clouds and the hilly land about them as if they traced mysterious incantations.

"I don't know," said the driver at last, and it was clear he was afraid to go on.

Presently a searchlight swept down the sky to them, stopped as it were with a start, scrutinised them, a blinding stare confused rather than mitigated by an intervening monstrous weed stem or so. They sat with their gloves held over their eyes, trying to look under them and meet that light.

"Go on," said Redwood after a while.

The driver still had his doubts; he tried to express them, and died down to "I don't know" again.

At last he ventured on. "Here goes," he said, and roused his machinery to motion again, followed intently by that great white eye.

To Redwood it seemed for a long time they were no longer on earth, but in a state of palpitating hurry through a luminous cloud. Teuf, teuf, teuf, teuf, went the machine, and ever and again--obeying I know not what nervous impulse--the driver sounded his horn.

They passed into the welcome darkness of a high-fenced lane, and down into a hollow and past some houses into that blinding stare again. Then for a space the road ran naked across a down, and they seemed to hang throbbing in immensity. Once more giant weeds rose about them and whirled past. Then quite abruptly close upon them loomed the figure of a giant, shining brightly where the searchlight caught him below, and black against the sky above. "Hullo there!" he cried, and "stop! There's no more road beyond ... Is that Father Redwood?"

Redwood stood up and gave a vague shout by way of answer, and then Cossar was in the road beside him, gripping both hands with both of his and pulling him out of the car.

"What of my son?" asked Redwood.

"He's all right," said Cossar. "They've hurt nothing serious in him."

"And your lads?"

"Well. All of them, well. But we've had to make a fight for it."

The Giant was saying something to the motor driver. Redwood stood aside as the machine wheeled round, and then suddenly Cossar vanished, everything vanished, and he was in absolute darkness for a space. The glare was following the motor back to the crest of the Keston hill. He watched the little conveyance receding in that white halo. It had a curious effect, as though it was not moving at all and the halo was. A group of war-blasted Giant elders flashed into gaunt scarred gesticulations and were swallowed again by the night ... Redwood turned to Cossar's dim outline again and clasped his hand. "I have been shut up and kept in ignorance," he said, "for two whole days."

"We fired the Food at them," said Cossar. "Obviously! Thirty shots. Eh!"

"I come from Caterham."

"I know you do." He laughed with a note of bitterness. "I suppose he's wiping it up."

II.

"Where is my son?" said Redwood.

"He is all right. The Giants are waiting for your message."

"Yes, but my son--..."

He passed with Cossar down a long slanting tunnel that was lit red for a moment and then became dark again, and came out presently into the great pit of shelter the Giants had made.

Redwood's first impression was of an enormous arena bounded by very high cliffs and with its floor greatly encumbered. It was in darkness save for the passing reflections of the watchman's searchlights that whirled perpetually high overhead, and for a red glow that came and went from a distant corner where two Giants worked together amidst a metallic clangour. Against the sky, as the glare came about, his eye caught the familiar outlines of the old worksheds and playsheds that were made for the Cossar boys. They were hanging now, as it were, at a cliff brow, and strangely twisted and distorted with the guns of Caterham's bombardment. There were suggestions of huge gun emplacements above there, and nearer were piles of mighty cylinders that were perhaps ammunition. All about the wide space below, the forms of great engines and incomprehensible bulks were scattered in vague disorder. The Giants appeared and vanished

among these masses and in the uncertain light; great shapes they were, not disproportionate to the things amidst which they moved. Some were actively employed, some sitting and lying as if they courted sleep, and one near at hand, whose body was bandaged, lay on a rough litter of pine boughs and was certainly asleep. Redwood peered at these dim forms; his eyes went from one stirring outline to another.

"Where is my son, Cossar?"

Then he saw him.

His son was sitting under the shadow of a great wall of steel. He presented himself as a black shape recognisable only by his pose,--his features were invisible. He sat chin upon hand, as though weary or lost in thought. Beside him Redwood discovered the figure of the Princess, the dark suggestion of her merely, and then, as the glow from the distant iron returned, he saw for an instant, red lit and tender, the infinite kindness of her shadowed face. She stood looking down upon her lover with her hand resting against the steel. It seemed that she whispered to him.

Redwood would have gone towards them.

"Presently," said Cossar. "First there is your message."

"Yes," said Redwood, "but--"

He stopped. His son was now looking up and speaking to the Princess, but in too low a tone for them to hear. Young Redwood raised his face, and she bent down towards him, and glanced aside before she spoke.

"But if we are beaten," they heard the whispered voice of young Redwood.

She paused, and the red blaze showed her eyes bright with unshed tears. She bent nearer him and spoke still lower. There was something so intimate and private in their bearing, in their soft tones, that Redwood--Redwood who had thought for two whole days of nothing but his son--felt himself intrusive there. Abruptly he was checked. For the first time in his life perhaps he realised how much more a son may be to his father than a father can ever be to a son; he realised the full predominance of the future over the past. Here between these two he had no part. His part was played. He turned to Cossar, in the instant realisation. Their eyes met. His voice was changed to the tone of a grey resolve.

"I will deliver my message now," he said. "Afterwards--... It will be soon enough then."

The pit was so enormous and so encumbered that it was a long and tortuous route to the place from which Redwood could speak to them all.

He and Cossar followed a steeply descending way that passed beneath an

arch of interlocking machinery, and so came into a vast deep gangway that ran athwart the bottom of the pit. This gangway, wide and vacant, and yet relatively narrow, conspired with everything about it to enhance Redwood's sense of his own littleness. It became, as it were, an excavated gorge. High overhead, separated from him by cliffs of darkness, the searchlights wheeled and blazed, and the shining shapes went to and fro. Giant voices called to one another above there, calling the Giants together to the Council of War, to hear the terms that Caterham had sent. The gangway still inclined downward towards black vastnesses, towards shadows and mysteries and inconceivable things, into which Redwood went slowly with reluctant footsteps and Cossar with a confident stride....

Redwood's thoughts were busy. The two men passed into the completest darkness, and Cossar took his companion's wrist. They went now slowly perforce.

Redwood was moved to speak. "All this," he said, "is strange."

"Big," said Cossar.

"Strange. And strange that it should be strange to me--I, who am, in a sense, the beginning of it all. It's--"

He stopped, wrestling with his elusive meaning, and threw an unseen gesture at the cliff.

"I have not thought of it before. I have been busy, and the years have passed. But here I see--It is a new generation, Cossar, and new emotions and new needs. All this, Cossar--"

Cossar saw now his dim gesture to the things about them.

"All this is Youth."

Cossar made no answers and his irregular footfalls went striding on.

"It isn't our youth, Cossar. They are taking things over. They are beginning upon their own emotions, their own experiences, their own way. We have made a new world, and it isn't ours. It isn't even--sympathetic. This great place--"

"I planned it," said Cossar, his face close.

"But now?"

"Ah! I have given it to my sons."

Redwood could feel the loose wave of the arm that he could not see.

"That is it. We are over--or almost over."

"Your message!"

"Yes. And then--"

"We're over."

"Well--?"

"Of course we are out of it, we two old men," said Cossar, with his familiar note of sudden anger. "Of course we are. Obviously. Each man for his own time. And now--it's their time beginning. That's all right. Excavator's gang. We do our job and go. See? That is what death is for. We work out all our little brains and all our little emotions, and then this lot begins afresh. Fresh and fresh! Perfectly simple. What's the trouble?"

He paused to guide Redwood to some steps.

"Yes," said Redwood, "but one feels--"

He left his sentence incomplete.

"That is what Death is for." He heard Cossar below him insisting, "How else could the thing be done? That is what Death is for."

III.

After devious windings and ascents they came out upon a projecting ledge from which it was possible to see over the greater extent of the Giants' pit, and from which Redwood might make himself heard by the whole of their assembly. The Giants were already gathered below and about him at different levels, to hear the message he had to deliver. The eldest son of Cossar stood on the bank overhead watching the revelations of the searchlights, for they feared a breach of the truce. The workers at the great apparatus in the corner stood out clear in their own light; they were near stripped; they turned their faces towards Redwood, but with a watchful reference ever and again to the castings that they could not leave. He saw these nearer figures with a fluctuating indistinctness, by lights that came and went, and the remoter ones still less distinctly. They came from and vanished again into the depths of great obscurities. For these Giants had no more light than they could help in the pit, that their eyes might be ready to see effectually any attacking force that might spring upon them out of the darkneses around.

Ever and again some chance glare would pick out and display this group or that of tall and powerful forms, the Giants from Sunderland clothed in overlapping metal plates, and the others clad in leather, in woven rope or in woven metal, as their conditions had determined. They sat amidst or rested their hands upon, or stood erect among machines and weapons as mighty as themselves, and all their faces, as they came and went from visible to invisible, had steadfast eyes.

He made an effort to begin and did not do so. Then for a moment his son's face glowed out in a hot insurgence of the fire, his son's face looking up to him, tender as well as strong; and at that he found a voice to reach them all, speaking across a gulf, as it were, to his son.

"I come from Caterham," he said. "He sent me to you, to tell you the terms he offers."

He paused. "They are impossible terms, I know, now that I see you here all together; they are impossible terms, but I brought them to you, because I wanted to see you all--and my son. Once more ... I wanted to see my son...."

"Tell them the terms," said Cossar.

"This is what Caterham offers. He wants you to go apart and leave his world!"

"Where?"

"He does not know. Vaguely somewhere in the world a great region is to be set apart.... And you are to make no more of the Food, to have no children of your own, to live in your own way for your own time, and then to end for ever."

He stopped.

"And that is all?"

"That is all."

There followed a great stillness. The darkness that veiled the Giants seemed to look thoughtfully at him.

He felt a touch at his elbow, and Cossar was holding a chair for him--a queer fragment of doll's furniture amidst these piled immensities. He sat down and crossed his legs, and then put one across the knee of the other, and clutched his boot nervously, and felt small and self-conscious and acutely visible and absurdly placed.

Then at the sound of a voice he forgot himself again.

"You have heard, Brothers," said this voice out of the shadows.

And another answered, "We have heard."

"And the answer, Brothers?"

"To Caterham?"

"Is No!"

"And then?"

There was a silence for the space of some seconds.

Then a voice said: "These people are right. After their lights, that is. They have been right in killing all that grew larger than its kind--beast and plant and all manner of great things that arose. They were right in trying to massacre us. They are right now in saying we must not marry our kind. According to their lights they are right. They know--it is time that we also knew--that you cannot have pigmies and giants in one world together. Caterham has said that again and again--clearly--their world or ours."

"We are not half a hundred now," said another, "and they are endless millions."

"So it may be. But the thing is as I have said."

Then another long silence.

"And are we to die then?"

"God forbid!"

"Are they?"

"No."

"But that is what Caterham says! He would have us live out our lives, die one by one, till only one remains, and that one at last would die also, and they would cut down all the giant plants and weeds, kill all the giant under-life, burn out the traces of the Food--make an end to us and to the Food for ever. Then the little pigmy world would be safe. They would go on--safe for ever, living their little pigmy lives, doing pigmy kindnesses and pigmy cruelties each to the other; they might even perhaps attain a sort of pigmy millennium, make an end to war, make an end to over-population, sit down in a world-wide city to practise pigmy arts, worshipping one another till the world begins to freeze...."

In the corner a sheet of iron fell in thunder to the ground.

"Brothers, we know what we mean to do."

In a spluttering of light from the searchlights Redwood saw earnest youthful faces turning to his son.

"It is easy now to make the Food. It would be easy for us to make Food for all the world."

"You mean, Brother Redwood," said a voice out of the darkness, "that it is for the little people to eat the Food."

"What else is there to do?"

"We are not half a hundred and they are many millions."

"But we held our own."

"So far."

"If it is God's will, we may still hold our own."

"Yes. But think of the dead!"

Another voice took up the strain. "The dead," it said. "Think of the unborn...."

"Brothers," came the voice of young Redwood, "what can we do but fight them, and if we beat them, make them take the Food? They cannot help but take the Food now. Suppose we were to resign our heritage and do this folly that Caterham suggests! Suppose we could! Suppose we give up this great thing that stirs within us, repudiate this thing our fathers did for us--that you, Father, did for us--and pass, when our time has come, into decay and nothingness! What then? Will this little world of theirs be as it was before? They may fight against greatness in us who are the children of men, but can they conquer? Even if they should destroy us every one, what then? Would it save them? No! For greatness

is abroad, not only in us, not only in the Food, but in the purpose of all things! It is in the nature of all things; it is part of space and time. To grow and still to grow: from first to last that is Being--that is the law of life. What other law can there be?"

"To help others?"

"To grow. It is still, to grow. Unless we help them to fail..."

"They will fight hard to overcome us," said a voice.

And another, "What of that?"

"They will fight," said young Redwood. "If we refuse these terms, I doubt not they will fight. Indeed I hope they will be open and fight. If after all they offer peace, it will be only the better to catch us unawares. Make no mistake, Brothers; in some way or other they will fight. The war has begun, and we must fight, to the end. Unless we are wise, we may find presently we have lived only to make them better weapons against our children and our kind. This, so far, has been only the dawn of battle. All our lives will be a battle. Some of us will be killed in battle, some of us will be waylaid. There is no easy victory--no victory whatever that is not more than half defeat for us. Be sure of that. What of that? If only we keep a foothold, if only we leave behind us a growing host to fight when we are gone!"

"And to-morrow?"

"We will scatter the Food; we will saturate the world with the Food."

"Suppose they come to terms?"

"Our terms are the Food. It is not as though little and great could live together in any perfection of compromise. It is one thing or the other. What right have parents to say, My child shall have no light but the light I have had, shall grow no greater than the greatness to which I have grown? Do I speak for you, Brothers?"

Assenting murmurs answered him.

"And to the children who will be women as well as to the children who will be men," said a voice from the darkness.

"Even more so--to be mothers of a new race ..."

"But for the next generation there must be great and little," said Redwood, with his eyes on his son's face.

"For many generations. And the little will hamper the great and the great press upon the little. So it must needs be, father."

"There will be conflict."

"Endless conflict. Endless misunderstanding. All life is that. Great and little cannot understand one another. But in every child born of man, Father Redwood, lurks some seed of greatness--waiting for the Food."

"Then I am to go to Caterham again and tell him--"

"You will stay with us, Father Redwood. Our answer goes to Caterham at dawn."

"He says that he will fight...."

"So be it," said young Redwood, and his brethren murmured assent.

"The iron waits," cried a voice, and the two giants who were working in the corner began a rhythmic hammering that made a mighty music to the scene. The metal glowed out far more brightly than it had done before, and gave Redwood a clearer view of the encampment than had yet come to him. He saw the oblong space to its full extent, with the great engines of warfare ranged ready to hand. Beyond, and at a higher level, the house of the Cossars stood. About him were the young giants, huge and beautiful, glittering in their mail, amidst the preparations for the morrow. The sight of them lifted his heart. They were so easily powerful! They were so tall and gracious! They were so steadfast in their movements! There was his son amongst them, and the first of all giant women, the Princess....

There leapt into his mind the oddest contrast, a memory of Bensington, very bright and little--Bensington with his hand amidst the soft breast feathers of that first great chick, standing in that conventionally furnished room of his, peering over his spectacles dubiously as cousin Jane banged the door....

It had all happened in a yesterday of one-and-twenty years.

Then suddenly a strange doubt took hold of him: that this place and present greatness were but the texture of a dream; that he was dreaming, and would in an instant wake to find himself in his study again, the Giants slaughtered, the Food suppressed, and himself a prisoner locked in. What else indeed was life but that--always to be a prisoner locked in! This was the culmination and end of his dream. He would wake through bloodshed and battle, to find his Food the most foolish of fancies, and his hopes and faith of a greater world to come no more than the coloured film upon a pool of bottomless decay. Littleness invincible!

So strong and deep was this wave of despondency, this suggestion of impending disillusionment, that he started to his feet. He stood and pressed his clenched fists into his eyes, and so for a moment remained, fearing to open them again and see, lest the dream should already have passed away....

The voice of the giant children spoke to one another, an undertone to

that clangorous melody of the smiths. His tide of doubt ebbed. He heard the giant voices; he heard their movements about him still. It was real, surely it was real--as real as spiteful acts! More real, for these great things, it may be, are the coming things, and the littleness, bestiality, and infirmity of men are the things that go. He opened his eyes. "Done," cried one of the two ironworkers, and they flung their hammers down.

A voice sounded above. The son of Cossar, standing on the great embankment, had turned and was now speaking to them all.

"It is not that we would oust the little people from the world," he said, "in order that we, who are no more than one step upwards from their littleness, may hold their world for ever. It is the step we fight for and not ourselves.... We are here, Brothers, to what end? To serve the spirit and the purpose that has been breathed into our lives. We fight not for ourselves--for we are but the momentary hands and eyes of the Life of the World. So you, Father Redwood, taught us. Through us and through the little folk the Spirit looks and learns. From us by word and birth and act it must pass--to still greater lives. This earth is no resting place; this earth is no playing place, else indeed we might put our throats to the little people's knife, having no greater right to live than they. And they in their turn might yield to the ants and vermin. We fight not for ourselves but for growth--growth that goes on for ever. To-morrow, whether we live or die, growth will conquer through us. That is the law of the spirit for ever more. To grow according to

the will of God! To grow out of these cracks and crannies, out of these shadows and darknesses, into greatness and the light! Greater," he said, speaking with slow deliberation, "greater, my Brothers! And then--still greater. To grow, and again--to grow. To grow at last into the fellowship and understanding of God. Growing.... Till the earth is no more than a footstool.... Till the spirit shall have driven fear into nothingness, and spread...." He swung his arm heavenward:--"There!" His voice ceased. The white glare of one of the searchlights wheeled about, and for a moment fell upon him, standing out gigantic with hand upraised against the sky.

For one instant he shone, looking up fearlessly into the starry deeps, mail-clad, young and strong, resolute and still. Then the light had passed, and he was no more than a great black outline against the starry sky--a great black outline that threatened with one mighty gesture the firmament of heaven and all its multitude of stars.

THE END.