

FLECKER

JAMES ELROY

THE LAST GENERATION: A
STORY OF THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

I had been awake for I know not how many hours that summer dawn while the sun came over the hills and coloured the beautiful roses in my mother's garden. As I lay drowsily gazing through the window, I thought I had never known a morning so sultry, and yet so pleasant. Outside not a leaf stirred; yet the air was fresh, and the madrigal notes of the birds came to me with a peculiar intensity and clearness. I listened intently to the curious sound of trilling, which drew nearer and nearer, until it seemed to merge into a whirring noise that filled the room and crowded at my ears. At first I could see nothing, and lay in deadly fear of the unknown; but soon I thought I saw rims and sparks of spectral fire floating through the pane. Then I heard some one say, "I am the Wind." But the voice was so like that of an old friend whom one sees again after many years that my terror departed, and I asked simply why the Wind had come.

"I have come to you," he replied, "because you are the first man I have discovered who is after my own heart. You whom others call dreamy and capricious, volatile and headstrong, you whom some accuse of weakness, others of unscrupulous abuse of power, you I know to be a true son of Æolus, a fit inhabitant for those caves of boisterous song."

"Are you the North Wind or the East Wind?" said I. "Or do you blow from the Atlantic? Yet if those be your feathers that shine upon the pane like yellow and purple threads, and if it be through your influence that the garden is so hot to-day, I should say you were the lazy South Wind, blowing from the countries that I love."

"I blow from no quarter of the Earth," replied the voice. "I am not in the compass. I am a little unknown Wind, and I cross not Space but Time. If you will come with me I will take you not over countries but over centuries, not directly, but waywardly, and you may travel where you will. You shall see Napoleon, Cæsar, Pericles, if you command. You may be anywhere in the world at any period. I will show you some of my friends, the poets..."

"And may I drink red wine with Praxiteles, or with Catullus beside his lake?"

"Certainly, if you know enough Latin and Greek, and can pronounce them intelligently."

"And may I live with Thais or Rhodope, or some wild Assyrian queen?"

"Unless they are otherwise employed, certainly."

"Ah, Wind of Time," I continued with a sigh, "we men of this age are rotten with booklore, and with a yearning for the past. And wherever I asked to go among those ancient days, I should soon get dissatisfied, and weary your bright wings. I will be no pillar of salt, a sterile portent in a sterile desert. Carry me forward, Wind of Time. What is there going to be?"

The Wind put his hand over my eyes.

I

AT BIRMINGHAM TOWN HALL

"This is our first stopping place," said a voice from the points of flame.

I opened my eyes expecting to see one of those extravagant scenes that imaginative novelists love to depict. I was prepared to find the upper air busy with aeroplanes and the earth beneath given over to unbridled debauch. Instead, I discovered myself seated on a tall electric standard, watching a crowd assembled before what I took to be Birmingham Town Hall. I was disappointed in this so tame a sight, until it flashed across me that I had never seen an English crowd preserve such an orderly and quiet demeanour; and a more careful inspection assured me that although no man wore a uniform, every man carried a rifle. They were obviously waiting for some one to come and address them from the balcony of the Town Hall, which was festooned with red flags. As the curtains were pulled aside I caught a momentary glimpse of an old person whose face I shall never forget, but apparently it was not for him that the breathless crowd was waiting. The man who finally appeared on the balcony was an individual not more than thirty years old, with a black beard and green eyes. At the sound of acclamation which greeted him he burst out into a loud laugh; then with a sudden seriousness he held up his hand and began to address his followers: —

"I have but few words for you, my army, a few bitter words. Need I encourage men to fight who have staked their existence to gain mastery? We cannot draw back; never will the cries of the slaughtered thousands we yearned to rescue from a more protracted, more cruel misery than war, make us forget the myriads who still await the supreme mercy of our revenge.

"For centuries and for centuries we endured the march of that Civilisation which now, by the weapons of her own making, we have set forth to destroy. We, men of Birmingham, dwellers in this hideous town unvisited by sun or moon, long endured to be told that we were in the van of progress, leading Humanity year by year along her glorious path. And, looking around them, the wise men saw the progress of civilisation, and what was it? What did it mean? Less country, fewer savages, deeper miseries, more millionaires, and more museums. So to-day we march on London.

"Let us commemorate, my friends, at this last hour, a great if all unwitting benefactor, the protomartyr of our cause. You remember that lank follower of the Newest Art, who lectured to us once within these very walls? He it was who first expounded to us the beauty of Birmingham, the artistic majesty of tall chimneys, the sombre glory of furnaces, the deep mystery of smoke, the sad picturesqueness of scrap-heaps and of slag. Then we began to hate our lives in earnest; then we arose and struck. Even now I shudder when I think of that lecturer's fate, and with a feeling of respect I commemorate his words to-day.

"On, then! You need not doubt of my victory, nor of my power. Some of you will die, but you know that death is rest. You do not need to fear the sombre fireworks of a mediæval Hell, nor yet the dreary dissipations of a Methodist Heaven. Come, friends, and march on London!"

They heard him in deep silence; there was a gentle stir of preparation; they faded far below me.

II

THE PROCLAMATION

At a point ten years farther along that dusky road the Wind set me down in a prodigious room. I had never before seen so large and splendid a construction, so gracefully embellished, so justly proportioned. The shape was elliptical, and it seemed as if the architect had drawn his inspiration from the Coliseum at Rome. This Hall, however, was much larger, and had the additional distinction of a roof, which, supported by a granite column, was only rendered visible from beneath by means of great bosses of clear gold. Galleries ran round the walls, and there was even a corkscrew balustrade winding up round the central pillar. Every part of the building was crowded with people. There seemed to be no window in the place, so that I could not tell whether or no it was night. The whole assembly was illuminated by a thousand electric discs, and the ventilation was almost perfectly planned on a system to me entirely strange. There was a raised throne at one end of the building on which sat a King decently dressed in black. I recognised the green-eyed man, and learnt that his name was Harris, Joshua Harris. The entire body of the Hall was filled by soldiers in mud-coloured tunics and waterproof boots. These were the men that had conquered the world.

As soon as the populace were well assembled the King made a sign to his Herald, who blew so sudden and terrific a blast with his trumpet that the multitude stopped their chattering with a start. The Herald proceeded to bawl a proclamation through his megaphone. I heard him distinctly, but should never have been able to reproduce his exact words had not the Wind very kindly handed to me one of the printed copies for free distribution which it had wafted from a chair. The proclamation ran thus: —

"I, Joshua Harris, by right of conquest and in virtue of my intelligence, King of Britain, Emperor of the two Americas, and Lord High Suzerain of the World, to the Princes, Presidents, and Peoples of the said world — , Ye know that in days past an old man now dead showed me how man's dolorous and fruitless sojourn on this globe might cease by his own act and wisdom; how pain and death and the black Power that made us might be frustrated of their accustomed prey. Then I swore an oath to fulfil that old man's scheme, and I gathered my followers, who were the miserable men, and the hungry men, and we have conquered all there is to conquer by our cannon and by our skill. Already last year I gave public notice, in the proclamation of Vienna, in the proclamation of Cairo, in the proclamation of Pekin, and in the proclamation of Rio Janeiro, that all bearing of children must cease, and that all women should be permanently sterilised according to the prescription of Doctor Smith. Therefore to-day, since there is no remote African plain, no island far away in the deep South Seas where our forces are not supreme and our agents not vigilant, I make my final proclamation to you, my army, and to you, Princes, Presidents, and Peoples of this world, that from this hour forth there be no child born of any woman, or, if born, that it be slain with its father and its mother (*a fainting woman had here to be carried out*)

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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