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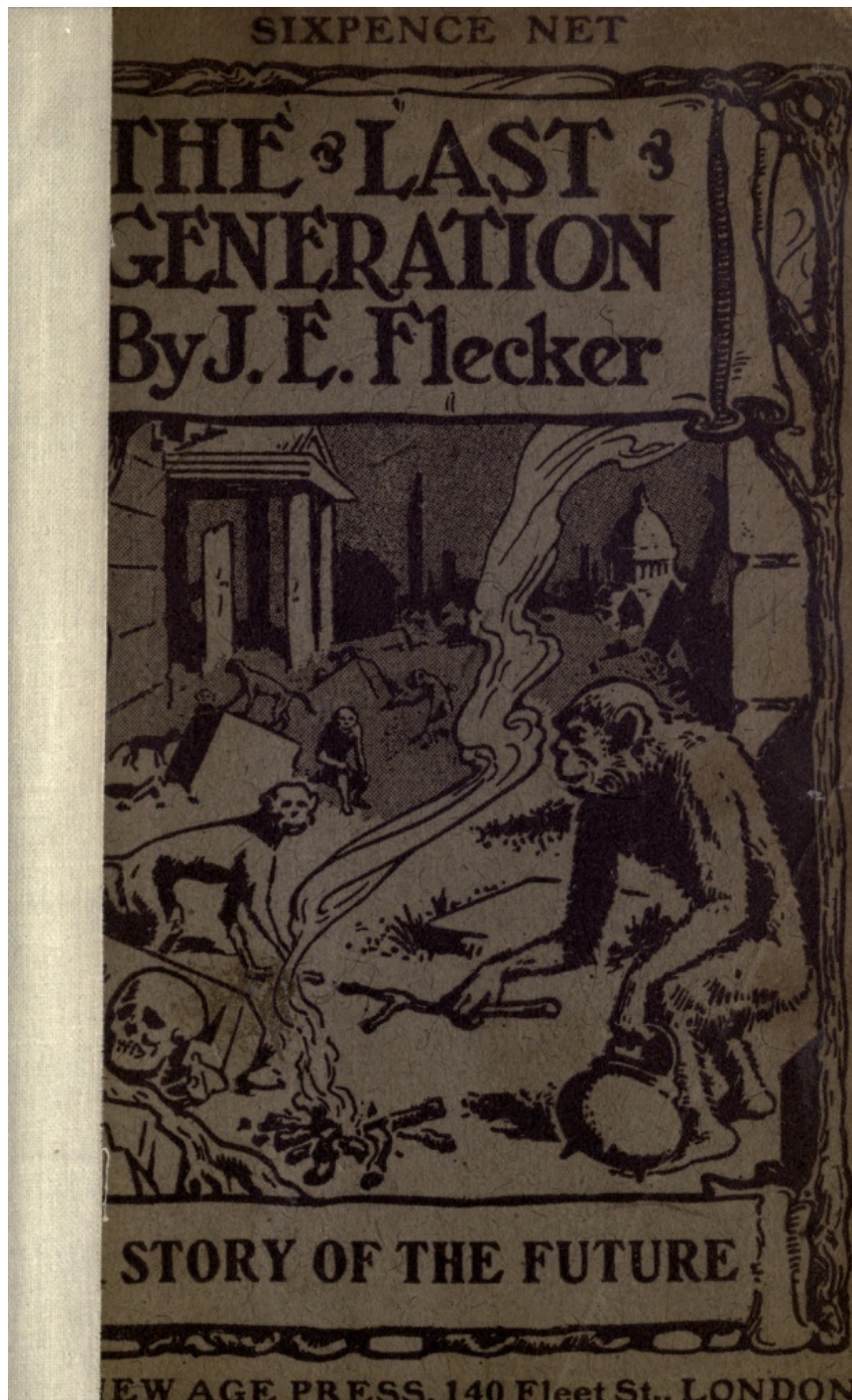
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THE LAST GENERATION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE BRIDGE OF FIRE

A BOOK OF POEMS CONTAINING THE
BALLAD OF HAMPSTEAD HEATH
AND THE TWIN SONNETS
OF BATHROLAIRE

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THE LAST GENERATION

A STORY OF THE FUTURE

BY
JAMES ELROY FLECKER

El hombre es el rey de la creación; vive (he lives) en la tierra y cree (he believes) en el cielo

DE ARTEAGA, *Spanish Grammar*



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TO

FRANK SAVERY

WHO TAUGHT, ENCOURAGED, AND
REVEALED

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THE LAST GENERATION

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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.

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"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."

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"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."

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"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

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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:—

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"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.

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"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.

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"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

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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.

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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:—

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"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 Peking, and in the proclamation of Rio Janeiro, that all bearing of children must

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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*), and to you, my terrestrial forces, I entrust the execution of my commands.

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"Joy then be with you, my people, for the granaries are full of corn and wine that I have laid up, sufficient for many years to come; joy be with you, since you are the last and noblest generation of mankind, and since Doctor Smith by his invention, and I by my wise prevision, have enabled you to live not only without payment and without work (*loud cheers from the galleries*), but also with luxury and splendour, and with all the delights, and none of the dangers, of universal love."

I expected the proclamation to be followed by an outburst of applause; but instead the whole multitude sat calm and motionless. Looking round I was struck by the hideous appearance of mankind. It was especially revolting to look at the ears of the soldiers in front, who had their backs turned to me. These stuck out from the bullet-like heads, and made the men look like two-handled teapots on stands. Yet here and there appeared in the galleries some woman's countenance beautified by the sorrows of our race, or some tall youth whose eyes expressed the darkest determination. The silence seemed to gather in folds. I was studying drowsily the Asiatic dresses and the nude people from Melanesia, when I heard a noise which I thought was that of the Wind. But I saw it was the King, who had begun to laugh. It was a very strange noise indeed, and very strange laughter.

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III

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THE MUTUAL EXTERMINATION CLUB

"You would perhaps like to stay here some time," said the Wind, "and look around. You will then understand the significance of this generation more clearly, and you may observe some interesting incidents."

I was standing with one or two other people outside a pseudo-Chinese erection, which I at first took to be a cricket pavilion, and then saw to be the headquarters of a rifle club. I apprehended from the placards that I was in Germany, and inquired in the language of the country, which I understand very well, what was the object of this rifle practice, and whether there was any thought of war.

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The man to whom I addressed myself, an adipose person with iron-rimmed spectacles and a kindly, intelligent face, seemed surprised at my question.

"You must be a stranger," he said. "This is our very notable *Vertilgungsverein*."

I understood: it was a Club for Mutual Extermination.

I then noticed that there were no ordinary targets, and that the cadets were pointing their rifles at a bearded man who stood with a covered pipe in his mouth, leaning against a tree some two hundred yards away.

After the report the bearded man held up both hands.

"That is to signify that he has been completely missed," said the fat gentleman. "One hand, wounded; two hands, missed. And that is reasonable (*vernünftig*), because if he were dead he could not raise either."

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I approved the admirable logic of the rule, and supposed that the man would now be allowed to go free.

"Oh yes, according to the rules," he answered, "he certainly is allowed to go free; but I do not think his sense of honour would permit him so to do."

"Is he then of very noble family?" I inquired.

"Not at all; he is a scientist. We have a great many scientists in our club. They are all so disappointed at the way in which human progress has been impeded, and at the impossibility of a continuous evolution of knowledge-accumulation, that they find no more attraction in life. And he is dead this time," he continued, shading his eyes to look, as soon as a second report had flashed.

"By the way," I asked, "I suppose you only exterminate—er—members of the club?"

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The fellow smiled with a little disdain. "Oh, it would be illegal for us to exterminate outsiders. But of course if you would like to join..."

"Why, that's never a woman going over to the tree!" I cried.

"Oh yes, we have quite a number of intellectual women and upper-class ladies of advanced ideas in the club. But I do not think that lady is an intellectual; she is more probably a passion-wreck."

She was indeed a very handsome woman in the prime of life, dressed with a little too much ostentation and coquetry in a sleeveless, transparent white blouse and a skirt to match.

My informant turned round to a skinny young student with hog's-bristle hair, and made some vulgar jest about its "being a pity to waste such a good piece of flesh." He was a superman, and imagined, falsely I believe, that an air of bluff cynicism, a Teutonic attempt at heartiness, was the true outward sign of inward superiority. The young man fired, and the woman raised the arm that was not shattered by the bullet. He fired again, and she fell on her knees, this time with a scream.

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"I think you had better have a shot," said the sharpshooter to my man. "I'm rather bad at this."

Indeed his hand was shaking violently.

My interlocutor bowed, and went over to take the rifle. The skinny student took his place by my side, and began talking to me as well. "He's an infallible shot that Müller there," he said, nodding at my former companion.... "Didn't I tell you?"

To my great relief the passion-wrecked lady fell dead. I was getting wildly excited, rent between horror and curiosity.

"You see that man in the plumed hat?" said the student. "He is coming round to say on whom the lot has fallen. Ah, he is coming this way, and making a sign at me. Good-day, sir," he said, taking off his hat with a deep and jerky bow. "I am afraid we must continue our conversation another time."

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THE EPISODE OF THE BABY

As soon as I turned away, rather horrified, from the merry proceedings of the Mutual Extermination Club, I seemed to be in England, or perhaps in America. At all events I was walking along a dusty highway in the midst of an inquisitive crowd. In front of me half-a-dozen members of the International Police Force (their tunics and boots gave me to understand their quality) were dragging along a woman who held a baby in her arms. A horror-struck and interested multitude surged behind, and rested only when the woman was taken into a large and disgusting edifice with iron gates. Aided by my distinguished appearance and carriage, I succeeded after some difficulty in persuading the Chief Gaoler to let me visit the cell where the mother was lodged, previous to undergoing an execution which would doubtless be as unpleasant as prolonged. I found a robust, apple-cheeked woman, very clean and neat, despite her forlorn condition and the rough handling the guards had used to her. She confessed to me with tears that she had been in her day a provincial courtesan, and that she had been overcome by desire to have a child, "just to see what it was like." She had therefore employed all imaginable shifts to avoid being injected with Smithia, and had fled with an old admirer to a lonely cave, where she had brought forth her child. "And a pretty boy too," she added, wringing her hands, "and only fourteen months old."

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She was so heartbroken that I did not like to ask her any more questions till she had recovered, for fear her answers should be unintelligible. Finally, as I desired to learn matters that were of common knowledge to the rest of the world, and was not anxious to arouse suspicion, I represented myself as a cultured foreigner who had just been released from a *manicomio*, and was therefore naturally in a state of profound ignorance on all that appertained to Modern History. I felt indeed that I would never have a better chance of gathering information than from conversation with this solitary woman. It would be her pleasure, not her duty, to instruct me.

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So I began by asking how the diminishing numbers of the military could keep a sufficient watch, and how it was that every one submitted so meekly to the proclamation. She answered that the police recruited themselves yearly from the more active and noble-minded of the people, that custom had a lot to do with the submissive attitude of mankind, and that apart from that, there was a great resolve abroad to carry out the project of King Harris to fulfilment. She went on to inform me that Smithia was tasteless, and would act even when drunk at meals, and not merely as an injection, that it acted on both sexes, and that it was otherwise innocuous. By now most of the well-springs, reservoirs, and cisterns had been contaminated by the fluid, of which large quantities had been prepared at a very cheap price. After gleaning sundry other details, I thanked her heartily and left the cell.

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Outside in the courtyard I discovered a large concourse of people examining the baby, who was naturally enough an object of extreme wonder to the whole countryside. The women called it a duck, and used other pet names that were not then in fashion, but most of the men thought it was an ugly little brat at best. The child was seated on a cushion, and despite his mother's absence was crowing vigorously and kicking with puny force. There was some debate as to how it should be killed. Some were for boiling and eating it; others were for hitting it on the head with a club.

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However, the official who held the cushion brought the conference to a close by inadvertently dropping the child on to the flags, and thereby breaking its neck.

V

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THE FLORENTINE LEAGUE

I feel certain on reflection that the scene of the last episode must have been America, for I remember returning to Europe on a French boat which landed me at Havre, and immediately taking the train to Paris. As I passed through Normandy, I saw hardly a soul stirring in the villages, and the small houses were all in a most dilapidated condition. There was no more need for farms, and villagers in their loneliness were flocking to the towns. Even the outer suburbs of Paris were mere masses of flaked and decaying plaster. An unpleasant crash into the buffers of Saint Lazare reminded me that the engine was being driven by an amateur; indeed, we had met the Dieppe train at Rouen, sent a pilot engine ahead to clear the way, and then raced it to Paris on the up-line amid enthusiastic cheers. We won, but were badly shaken.

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We left the train beside the platform, trusting to the Church Missionary Society man to put it away in the engine-shed. These excellent philanthropists were unwearying in their efforts to prevent needless loss of life, and such work as was still done in the world was performed almost entirely by them and by members of kindred British Protestant societies. They wore a blue badge to distinguish themselves, and were ordered about by every one. At the call of "Anglais, Anglais!" some side-whiskered man would immediately run up to obey the summons, and you could send him to get food from the Store for you, and he would be only too pleased. They would also cook hot dinners.

I walked through the Boulevard Montmartre, and at every step I took I became more profoundly miserable. One had called Paris the pleasure city, the fairest city in the world, in the days before the Proclamation; for one found it vibrating with beauty and life. And now assuredly it was supremely a city of pleasure, for there was no work to be done at all. So no artist ever took any trouble now, since there was neither payment nor fame attainable; and wonderful caricatures of philanthropists scribbled on the pavement or elsewhere, or clever ribald songs shrieking out of gramophones were the only reminder of that past and beautiful Paris that I had known. There was a fatuous and brutal expression on most of the faces, and the people seemed to be too lazy to do anything except drink and fondle. Even the lunatics attracted but little attention. There was a flying-machine man who was determined, as he expressed it, "that it should not be said of the human race that it never flew." Even the "Anglais" were tired of helping him with his machine, which he was quietly building on the Place de l'Opéra—a mass of intricate wires, bamboos, and paper boxes; and the inventor himself frequently got lost as he climbed cheerily among the rigging.

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Weary of all this, I slept, alone, in one of the public beds, and early next morning I clambered up the sacred slope of the Butte to see the sunrise. The great silence of early morning was over the town, a deathly and unnatural stillness. As I stood leaning over the parapet, thinking miserably, a young man came up the hill slowly yet gracefully, so that it was a pleasure to look at him. His face was sad and noble, and as I had never thought to see nobility again, I hoped he would be a friend to me. However, he turned himself almost roughly, and said:

"Why have you come here?"

"To look at the fallen city I loved long ago," I replied, with careless sorrow.

"Have you then also read of the old times in books?" he said, looking round at me with large bright eyes.

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"Yes, I have read many books," said I, trying to evade the subject. "But will you forgive me if I ask an impertinent question?"

"Nothing coming from you, sir, could be impertinent."

"I wanted to ask how old you are, because you seem so young. You seem to be only seventeen."

"You could tell me nothing more delightful," the young man replied, with a gentle, yet strong and deep intonation. "I am indeed one of the youngest men alive—I am twenty-two years old. And I am looking for the last time on the city of Paris."

"Do not say that," I cried. "All this may be horrible, but it cannot be as dull as Death. Surely there must be some place in the world where we could live among beauty, some other folk besides ourselves who are still poets. Why should one die until life becomes hopelessly ugly and deformed?"

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"I am not going to kill myself, as you seem to think," said the young man. "I am going, and I pray and implore you to come with me, to a place after your heart and mine, that some friends have prepared. It is a garden, and we are a League. I have already been there three months, and I have put on these horrible clothes for one day only, in obedience to a rule of our League, that every one should go out once a year to look at the world around. We are thinking of abolishing

the rule."

"How pleasant and beautiful it sounds!"

"It is, and will you come with me there right now?"

"Shall I be admitted?"

"My word will admit you at once. Come this way with me. I have a motor at the bottom of the hill."

During the journey I gathered much information about the League, which was called the Florentine League. It had been formed out of the youngest "years" of the race, and its members had been chosen for their taste and elegance. For although few parents of the day had thought it worth while to teach their children anything more recondite than their letters and tables, yet some of the boys and girls had developed a great desire for knowledge, and an exceeding great delight in Poetry, Art, Music, and all beautiful sights and sounds.

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"We live," he said, "apart from the world, like that merry company of gentle-folk who, when the plague was raging at Florence, left the city, and retiring to a villa in the hills, told each other those enchanting tales. We enjoy all that Life, Nature, and Art can give us, and Love has not deserted the garden, but still draws his golden bow. It is no crippled and faded Eros of the city that dwells among us, but the golden-thighed God himself. For we do all things with refinement, and not like those outside, seeing to it that in all our acts we keep our souls and bodies both delicate and pure."

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We came to the door of a long wall, and knocked. White-robed attendants appeared in answer to our summons, and I was stripped, bathed, and anointed by their deft hands. All the while a sound of singing and subdued laughter made me eager to be in the garden. I was then clothed in a very simple white silk garment with a gold clasp; the open door let sunshine in upon the tiles, and my friend, also clothed in silk, awaited me. We walked out into the garden, which was especially noticeable for those flowers which have always been called old-fashioned—I mean hollyhocks, sweet-william, snapdragons, and Canterbury bells, which were laid out in regular beds. Everywhere young men and women were together: some were walking about idly in the shade; some played at fives; some were reading to each other in the arbours. I was shown a Grecian temple in which was a library, and dwelling-places near it. I afterwards asked a girl called Fiore di Fiamma what books the Florentines preferred to read, and she told me that they loved the Poets best, not so much the serious and strenuous as those whose vague and fleeting fancies wrap the soul in an enchanting sorrow.

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I asked: "Do you write songs, Fiore di Fiamma?"

"Yes, I have written a few, and music for them."

"Do sing me one, and I will play the guitar."

So she sang me one of the most mournful songs I had ever heard, a song which had given up all hope of fame, written for the moment's laughter or for the moment's tears.

"Wind," I said that night, "stay with me many years in the garden."

But it was not the Wind I kissed.

VI

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OUTSIDE

I passed many years in that sad, enchanted place, dreaming at times of my mother's roses, and of friends that I had known before, and watching our company grow older and fewer. There was a rule that no one should stay there after their thirty-seventh birthday, and some old comrades passed weeping from us to join the World Outside. But most of them chose to take poison and to die quietly in the Garden; we used to burn their bodies, singing, and set out their urns on the grass. In time I became Prince of the Garden: no one knew my age, and I grew no older; yet my Flame-Flower knew when I intended to die. Thus we lived on undisturbed, save for some horrible shout that rose from time to time from beyond the walls; but we were not afraid, as we had cannon mounted at our gates. At last there were twelve of us left in the precinct of delight, and we decided to die all together on the eve of the Queen's birthday. So we made a great feast and held good cheer, and had the poison prepared, and cast lots. The first lot fell to Fiore di Fiamma, and the last lot to me; whereat all applauded. I watched my Queen, who had never seemed to me as noble as then, in her mature and majestic beauty. She kissed me, and drank, and the others drank, became very pale, and fell to earth. Then I, rising with a last pæan of exultation, raised the cup to my lips.

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But that moment the trees and flowers bent beneath a furious storm, and the cup was wrenched out of my hand by a terrific blast and sent hurtling to the ground. I saw the rainbow-coloured feathers flashing, and for a second I saw the face of the Wind himself. I trembled, and sinking

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into my chair buried my face in my hands. A wave of despair and loneliness broke over me. I felt like a drowning man.

"Take me back, Lord of the Wind!" I cried. "What am I doing among these dead æsthetes? Take me back to the country where I was born, to the house where I am at home, to the things I used to handle, to the friends with whom I talked, before man went mad. I am sick of this generation that cannot strive or fight, these people of one idea, this doleful, ageing world. Take me away!"

But the Wind replied in angry tones, not gently as of old:—

"Is it thus you treat me, you whom I singled out from men? You have forgotten me for fifteen years; you have wandered up and down a garden, oblivious of all things that I had taught you, incurious, idle, listless, effeminate. Now I have saved you from dying a mock death, like a jester in a tragedy; and in time I will take you back, for that I promised; but first you shall be punished as you deserve." So saying, the Wind raised me aloft and set me beyond the wall.

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I dare not describe—I fear to remember the unutterable loathing of the three years I spent outside. The unhappy remnant of a middle-aged mankind was gradually exchanging lust for gluttony. Crowds squatted by day and by night round the Houses of Dainty Foods that had been stocked by Harris the King; there was no youthful face to be found among them, and scarcely one that was not repulsively deformed with the signs of lust, cunning, and debauch. At evening there were incessant fires of crumbling buildings, and fat women made horrible attempts at revelry. There seemed to be no power of thought in these creatures. The civilisation of ages had fallen from them like a worthless rag from off their backs. Europeans were as bestial as Hottentots, and the noblest thing they ever did was to fight. For sometimes a fierce desire of battle seized them, and then they tore each other passionately with teeth and nails.

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I cannot understand it even now. Surely there should have been some Puritans somewhere, or some Philosophers waiting to die with dignity and honour. Was it that there was no work to do? Or that there were no children to love? Or that there was nothing young in the World? Or that all beautiful souls perished in the garden?

I think it must have been the terrible thought of approaching extinction that obsessed these distracted men. And perhaps they were not totally depraved. There was a rough fellowship among them, a desire to herd together; and for all that they fought so much, they fought in groups. They never troubled to look after the sick and the wounded, but what could they do?

One day I began to feel that I too was one of them—I, who had held aloof in secret ways so long, joined the gruesome company in their nightly dance, and sat down to eat and drink their interminable meal. Suddenly a huge, wild, naked man appeared in front of the firelight, a prophet, as it appeared, who prophesied not death but life. He flung out his lean arms and shouted at us: "In vain have you schemed and lingered and died, O Last Generation of the Damned. For the cities shall be built again, and the mills shall grind anew, and the church bells shall ring, and the Earth be repopled with new miseries in God's own time."

[Pg 48]

I could not bear to hear this fellow speak. Here was one of the old sort of men, the men that talked evil, and murmured about God. "Friends," I said, turning to the Feasters, "we will have no skeletons like that at our feast." So saying I seized a piece of flaming wood from the fire, and rushed at the man. He struggled fiercely, but he had no weapon, and I beat him about the head till he fell, and death rattled in his throat—rattled with what seemed to me a most familiar sound. I stood aghast; then wiped the blood from the man's eyes and looked into them.

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"Who are you?" I exclaimed. "I have seen you before; I seem to know the sound of your voice and the colour of your eyes. Can you speak a word and tell us your story, most unhappy prophet, before you die?"

"Men of the Last Generation," said the dying man, raising himself on his elbow—"Men of the Last Generation, I am Joshua Harris, your King."

As brainless frogs who have no thought or sense in them, yet shrink when they are touched, and swim when the accustomed water laves their eager limbs, so did these poor creatures feel a nerve stirring within them, and unconsciously obey the voice which had commanded them of old. As though the mere sound of his tremulous words conveyed an irresistible mandate, the whole group came shuffling nearer. All the while they preserved a silence that made me afraid, so reminiscent was it of that deadly hush that had followed the Proclamation, of the quiet army starting for London, and especially of that mysterious and sultry morning so many years ago when the roses hung their enamelled heads and the leaves were as still as leaves of tin or copper. They sat down in circles round the fire, maintaining an orderly disposition, like a stray battalion of some defeated army which is weary of fruitless journeys in foreign lands, but still remembers discipline and answers to command. Meanwhile, the dying man was gathering with a noiseless yet visible effort every shred of strength from his massive limbs, and preparing to give them his last message. As he looked round on that frightful crowd great tears, that his own pain and impending doom could never have drawn from him, filled his strange eyes.

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"Forgive me—forgive me," he said at last, clearly enough for all to hear. "If any of you still know what mercy is, or the meaning of forgiveness, say a kind word to me. Loving you, relying on humanity and myself, despising the march of Time and the power of Heaven, I became a false redeemer, and took upon my back the burden of all sin. But how was I to know, my people, I who am only a man, whither my plans for your redemption would lead? Have none of you a word to

[Pg 51]

say?

"Is there no one here who remembers our fighting days? Where are the great lieutenants who stood at my side and cheered me with counsel? Where are Robertson, Baldwin, and Andrew Spencer? Are there none of the old set left?"

He brushed the tears and blood from his eyes and gazed into the crowd. Pointing joyously to an old man who sat not far away he called out, "I know you, Andrew, from that great scar on your forehead. Come here, Andrew, and that quickly." [Pg 52]

The old man seemed neither to hear nor understand him, but sat like all the rest, blinking and unresponsive.

"Andrew," he cried, "you must know me! Think of Brum and South Melton Street. Be an Englishman, Andrew—come and shake hands!"

The man looked at him with staring, timid eyes; then shuddered all over, scrambled up from the ground, and ran away.

"It does not matter," murmured the King of the World. "There are no men left. I have lived in the desert, and I saw there that which I would I had seen long ago—visions that came too late to warn me. For a time my Plan has conquered; but that greater Plan shall be victorious in the end."

I was trying to stanch the wounds I had inflicted, and I hoped to comfort him, but he thrust me aside. [Pg 53]

"I know that no man of this generation could have killed me. I have nothing in common with you, bright Spirit. It was not you I loved, not for you I fought and struggled, but for these. I do not want to be reminded, by that light of reason shining in your eyes, of what we were all of us, once. It was a heroic age, when good and evil lived together, and misery bound man to man. Yet I will not regret what I have done. I ask forgiveness not of God, but of Man; and I claim the gratitude of thousands who are unknown, and unknown shall ever remain. For ages and ages God must reign over an empty kingdom, since I have brought to an end one great cycle of centuries. Tell me, Stranger, was I not great in my day?"

He fell back, and the Wind that took his Spirit carried me also into space.

VII

[Pg 54]

THE LAST MEN

The Wind bore me onwards more than forty years, and I found seated beside a granary half-a-dozen wrinkled and very aged men, whose faces were set with a determination to go on living to the bitter end. They were delirious, and naked; they tore their white beards; they mumbled and could not speak. The great beasts came out of the forest by night softly and gazed at them with their lantern eyes, but never did them harm. All day long they ate and slept or wandered a little aimlessly about. During that year four of them died.

Afterwards I saw the last two men. One of them was lying on the ground gasping passionately for breath, his withered limbs awry with pain. I could see that he had been a magnificent man in his youth. As his old friend died, the Last of the Race remembered his Humanity. He bent down, kissed the livid lips, carefully and tearfully closed the filmed red eyes. He even tried to scratch a grave with his long finger-nails, but soon despaired. He then went away, plodding as fast as he could hobble, weeping silently, afraid of the Dead. In the afternoon he came to a vast city, where many corpses lay; and about nightfall, when the stars were shining, he came to a massive half-ruined Dome that had been used for the worship of some God. Entering, he tottered towards the altar, which still stood, half-buried in stone-dust and flakes; and reaching up to a great bronze Crucifix that stood upon it, with his dying strength he clasped to his arms the Emblem of our Sorrow. [Pg 55]

I saw the vast Halls and Palaces of men falling in slowly, decaying, crumbling, destroyed by nothing but the rains and the touch of Time. And looking again I saw wandering over and above the ruins, moving curiously about, myriads of brown, hairy, repulsive little apes. [Pg 56]

One of them was building a fire with sticks.

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