

## CHAPTER XII

MICHAEL MUSES

MICHAEL and Mr. Blythe sought the Mother of Parliaments and found her in commotion. Liberalism had refused, and Labour was falling from its back. A considerable number of people were in Parliament Square contemplating Big Ben and hoping for sensation.

"I'm not going in," said Michael. "There won't be a division to-night. General Election's a foregone conclusion, now. I want to think."

"One will go up for a bit," said Mr. Blythe; and they parted, Michael returning to the streets. The night was clear, and he had a longing to hear the voice of his country. But—where? For his countrymen would be discussing this pro and that con, would be mentioning each his personal 'grief'—here the Income Tax, there the dole; the names of leaders, the word Communism. Nowhere would he catch the echo of the uneasiness in the hearts of all. The Tories—as Fleur had predicted—would come in now. The country would catch at the anodyne of 'strong stable government.' But could strong stable government remove the inherent canker, the lack of balance in the top-heavy realm? Could it still the gnawing ache which everybody felt, and nobody would express?

'Spoiled,' thought Michael, 'by our past prosperity. We shall never admit it,' he thought, 'never! And yet in our bones we feel it!'

England with the silver spoon in her mouth and no

longer the teeth to hold it there, or the will to part with it! And her very qualities—the latent ‘grit,’ the power to take things smiling, the lack of nerves and imagination! Almost vices, now, perpetuating the rash belief that England could still ‘muddle through’ without special effort, although with every year there was less chance of recovering from shock, less time in which to exercise the British ‘virtues.’ ‘Slow in the uptak,’ thought Michael, ‘it’s a ghastly fault in 1924.’

Thus musing, he turned East. Mid-theatre-hour, and the ‘Great Parasite’—as Sir James Foggart called it—was lying inert, and bright. He walked the length of wakeful Fleet Street into the City so delirious by day, so dead by night. Here England’s wealth was snoozing off the day’s debauch. Here were all the frame and filaments of English credit. And based on—what? On food and raw material from which England, undefended in the air, might be cut off by a fresh war; on Labour, too big for European boots. And yet that credit stood high still, soothing all with its ‘panache’—save, perhaps, receivers of the dole. With her promise to pay, England could still purchase anything, except a quiet heart.

And Michael walked on—through Whitechapel, busy still and coloured—into Mile End. The houses had become low, as if to give the dwellers a better view of stars they couldn’t reach. He had crossed a frontier. Here was a different race almost; another England, but as happy-go-lucky and as hand-to-mouth as the England of Fleet Street and the City. Aye, and more! For the England in Mile End knew that whatever she felt could have no effect on policy. Mile on mile, without an end, the low grey streets stretched towards the ultimate deserted grass. Michael did not follow them, but coming to a Cinema, turned in.

The show was far advanced. Bound and seated in front of the bad cowboy on a bronco, the heroine was crossing what Michael shrewdly suspected to be the film company's pet paddock. Every ten seconds she gave way to John T. Bronson, Manager of the Tucsonville Copper Mine, devouring the road in his 60 h.p. Packard, to cut her off before she reached the Pima river. Michael contemplated his fellow gazers. Lapping it up! Strong stable government—not much! This was their anodyne and they could not have enough of it. He saw the bronco fall, dropped by a shot from John T. Bronson, and the screen disclose the words: "Hairy Pete grows desperate. . . . 'You shall not have her, Bronson.'" Quite! He was throwing her into the river instead, to the words: "John T. Bronson dives." There he goes! He has her by her flowing hair! But Hairy Pete is kneeling on the bank. The bullets chip the water. Through the heroine's fair perforated shoulder the landscape is almost visible. What is that sound? Yes! John T. Bronson is setting his teeth! He lands, he drags her out. From his cap he takes his automatic. Still dry—thank God!

"Look to yourself, Hairy Pete!" A puff of smoke. Pete squirms and bites the sand—he seems almost to absorb the desert. "Hairy Pete gets it for keeps!" Slow music, slower! John T. Bronson raises the reviving form. Upon the bank of the Pima river they stand embraced, and the sun sets. "At last, my dinky love!"

'Pom, pom! that's the stuff!' thought Michael, returning to the light of night: 'Back to the Land! "Plough the fields and scatter"—when they can get this? Not much!' And he turned West again, taking a seat on the top of a 'bus beside a man with grease-stains on his clothes. They travelled in silence till Michael said:

“What do you make of the political situation, sir?”

The possible plumber replied, without turning his head:

“I should say they’ve overreached theirselves.”

“Ought to have fought on Russia—oughtn’t they?”

“Russia—that cock won’t fight either. Nao—ought to ‘ave ‘eld on to the Spring, an’ fought on a good stiff Budget.”

“Real class issue?”

“Yus!”

“But do you think class politics can wipe out unemployment?”

The man’s mouth moved under his moustache as if mumbling a new idea.

“Ah! I’m fed up with politics; in work to-day and out to-morrow—what’s the good of politics that can’t give you a permanent job?”

“That’s it.”

“Reparations,” said his neighbour; “*we’re* not goin’ to benefit by reparations. The workin’ classes ought to stand together in every country.” And he looked at Michael to see how he liked *that*.

“A good many people thought so before the war; and see what happened.”

“Ah!” said the man, “and what good’s it done us?”

“Have you thought of emigrating to the Dominions?”

The man shook his head.

“Don’t like what I see of the Austrylians and Canydians.”

“Confirmed Englishman—like myself.”

“That’s right,” said the man. “So long, Mister,” and he got off.

Michael travelled till the ‘bus put him down under Big Ben, and it was nearly twelve. Another election! Could he stand a second time without showing his true colours?

Not the faintest hope of making Foggartism clear to a rural constituency in three weeks! If he spoke from now till the day of the election, they would merely think he held rather extreme views on Imperial Preference, which, by the way, he did. He could never tell the electorate that he thought England was on the wrong tack—one might just as well not stand. He could never buttonhole the ordinary voter, and say to him: "Look here, you know, there's no earthly hope of any real improvement for another ten years; in the meantime we must face the music, and pay more for everything, so that twenty years hence we may be safe from possible starvation, and self-supporting within the Empire." It wasn't done. Nor could he say to his Committee: "My friends, I represent a policy that no one else does, so far."

No! If he meant to stand again, he must just get the old wheezes off his chest. But did he mean to stand again? Few people had less conceit than Michael—he knew himself for a lightweight. But he had got this bee into his bonnet; the longer he lived the more it buzzed, the more its buzz seemed the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and that wilderness his country. To stop up that buzzing in his ears; to turn his back on old Blythe; to stifle his convictions, and yet remain in Parliament—he could not! It was like the war over again. Once in, you couldn't get out. And he was 'in'—committed to something deeper far than the top dressings of Party politics. Foggartism had a definite solution of England's troubles to work towards—an independent, balanced Empire; an England safe in the air, and free from unemployment—with Town and Country once more in some sort of due proportion! Was it such a hopeless dream? Apparently!

'Well,' thought Michael, putting his latch-key in his door, 'they may call me what kind of a bee fool they like

—I shan't budge.' He went up to his dressing-room and, opening the window, leaned out.

The rumourous town still hummed ; the sky was faintly coloured by reflection from its million lights. A spire was visible, some stars ; the tree foliage in the Square hung flat, unstirred by wind. Peaceful and almost warm—the night. Michael remembered a certain evening—the last London air raid of the war. From his convalescent hospital he had watched it for three hours.

'What fools we all are not to drop fighting in the air,' he thought : 'Well, if we don't, I shall go all out for a great air force—all hangs, for us, on safety from air attack. Even the wise can understand that.'

Two men had stopped beneath his window, talking. One was his next-door neighbour.

"Mark my words," said his neighbour, "the election'll see a big turnover."

"Yes ; and what are you going to do with it ?" said the other.

"Let things alone ; they'll right themselves. I'm sick of all this depressing twaddle. A shilling off the Income Tax, and you'll see."

"How are you going to deal with the Land ?"

"Oh ! damn the Land ! Leave it to itself, that's all the farmers really want. The more you touch it, the worse it gets."

"Let the grass grow under your feet ?"

The neighbour laughed. "That's about it. Well, what else *can* you do—the Country won't have it. Good night !"

Sounds of a door, of footsteps. A car drove by ; a moth flew in Michael's face. "The Country won't have it !" Policies ! What but mental yawns, long shrugs of the shoulders, trustings to Luck ! What else could they be ? *The Country wouldn't have it !* And Big Ben struck twelve.