

CHAPTER XIV

FURTHER CONSIDERATION

THE Government had 'taken their toss' over the Editor—no one could say precisely why—and Michael sat down to compose his Address. How say enough without saying anything? And, having impetuously written: "Electors of Mid-Bucks," he remained for many moments still as a man who has had too good a dinner. "If"—he traced words slowly—"if you again return me as your representative, I shall do my best for the Country according to my lights. I consider the limitation of armaments, and, failing that, the security of Britain through the enlargement of our Air defences; the development of home agriculture; the elimination of unemployment through increased emigration to the Dominions; and the improvement of the national health particularly through the abatement of slums and smoke, to be the most pressing and immediate concerns of British policy. If I am returned, I shall endeavour to foster these ends with determination and coherence; and try not to abuse those whose opinions differ from my own. At my meetings I shall seek to give you some concrete idea of what is in my mind, and submit myself to your questioning."

Dared he leave it at that? Could one issue an address containing no disparagement of the other side, no panegyric of his own? Would his Committee allow it? Would the electors swallow it? Well, if his Committee didn't like it—they could turn it down, and himself with it; only—they wouldn't have time to get another candidate!

The Committee, indeed, did not like it, but they lumped it ; and the Address went out with an effigy on it of Michael, looking, as he said, like a hair-dresser. Thereon he plunged into a fray, which, like every other, began in the general and ended in the particular.

During the first Sunday lull at Lippinghall, he developed his poultry scheme—by marking out sites, and deciding how water could be laid on. The bailiff was sulky. In his view it was throwing away money. “ Fellers like that ! ” Who was going to teach them the job ? He had no time, himself. It would run into hundreds, and might just as well be poured down the gutter. “ The townsman’s no mortal use on the land, Master Michael.”

“ So everybody says. But, look here, Tutfield, here are three ‘ down and outs,’ two of them ex-Service, and you’ve got to help me put this through. You say yourself this land’s all right for poultry—well, it’s doing no good now. Bowman knows every last thing about chickens, set him on to it until these chaps get the hang. Be a good fellow and put your heart into it ; you wouldn’t like being ‘ down and out ’ yourself.”

The bailiff had a weakness for Michael, whom he had known from his bottle up. He knew the result, but if Master Michael liked to throw his father’s money away, it was no business of his. He even went so far as to mention that he knew “ a feller ” who had a hut for sale not ten miles away ; and that there was “ plenty of wood in the copse for the cuttin’.”

On the Tuesday after the Government had fallen Michael went up to town and summoned a meeting of his ‘ down and outs.’ They came at three the following day, and he placed them in chairs round the dining-table. Standing under the Goya, like a general about to detail a plan of attack which others would have to execute, he

developed his proposal. The three faces expressed little, and that without conviction. Only Bergfeld had known anything of it, before, and his face was the most doubting.

"I don't know in the least," went on Michael, "what you think of it; but you all want jobs—two of you in the open, and you, Boddick, don't mind what it is, I think."

"That's right, sir," said Boddick, "I'm on."

Michael instantly put him down as the best man of the three.

The other two were silent till Bergfeld said:

"If I had my savings——"

Michael interrupted quickly:

"I'm putting in the capital; you three put in the brains and labour. It's probably not more than a bare living, but I hope it'll be a healthy one. What do *you* say, Mr. Swain?"

The hair-dresser, more shadow-stricken than ever, in the glow of Fleur's Spanish room, smiled.

"I'm sure it's very kind of you. I don't mind havin' a try—only, who's goin' to boss the show?"

"Co-operation, Mr. Swain."

"Ah!" said the hair-dresser; "thought so. But I've seen a lot of tries at that, and it always ends in one bloke swallerin' the rest."

"Very well," said Michael, suddenly, "I'll boss it. But if any of you crane at the job, say so at once, and have done with it. Otherwise I'll get that hut delivered and set up, and we'll start this day month."

Boddick got up, and said: "Right, sir. What about my children?"

"How old, Boddick?"

"Two little girls, four and five."

"Oh! yes!" Michael had forgotten this item. "We must see about that."

Boddick touched his forelock, shook Michael's hand, and went out. The other two remained standing.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bergfeld; good-bye, Mr. Swain!"

"If I might——"

"Could I speak to you for a minute?"

"Anything you have to say," said Michael, astutely, "had better be said in each other's presence."

"I've always been used to hair."

'Pity,' thought Michael, 'that Life didn't drop that "h" for him—poor beggar!' "Well, we'll get you a breed of birds that can be shingled," he said. The hair-dresser smiled down one side of his face. "Beggars can't be choosers," he remarked.

"I wished to ask you," said Bergfeld, "what system we shall adopt?"

"That's got to be worked out. Here are two books on poultry-keeping; you'd better read one each, and swop."

He noted that Bergfeld took both without remonstrance on the part of Swain.

Seeing them out into the Square, he thought: 'Rum team! It won't work, but they've got their chance.'

A young man who had been standing on the pavement came forward.

"Mr. Michael Mont, M.P.?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Michael Mont at home?"

"I think so. What do you want?"

"I must see her personally, please."

"Who are you from?"

"Messrs. Settlewhite and Stark—a suit."

"Dressmakers?"

The young man smiled.

"Come in," said Michael. "I'll see if she's at home."

Fleur was in the 'parlour.'

"A young man from some dressmaker's for you, dear."

"Mrs. Michael Mont? In the suit of Ferrar against Mont—libel. Good day, madam."

Between those hours of four and eight, when Soames arrived from Mapledurham, Michael suffered more than Fleur. To sit and see a legal operation performed on her with all the scientific skill of the British Bar, it was an appalling prospect; and there would be no satisfaction in Marjorie Ferrar's also being on the table, with her inside exposed to the gaze of all! He was only disconcerted, therefore, when Fleur said:

"All right; if she wants to be opened up, she shall be. I know she flew to Paris with Walter Nazing last November; and I've always been told she was Bertie Curfew's mistress for a year."

A Society case—cream for all the cats in Society, muck for all the blow-flies in the streets—and Fleur the hub of it! He waited for Soames with impatience. Though 'Old Forsyte's' indignation had started this, Michael turned to him now, as to an anchor let go off a lee shore. The 'old man' had experience, judgment, and a chin; he would know what, except bearing it with a grin, could be done. Gazing at a square foot of study wall which had escaped a framed caricature, he reflected on the underlying savagery of life. He would be eating a lobster tonight that had been slowly boiled alive! This study had been cleaned out by a charwoman whose mother was dying of cancer, whose son had lost a leg in the war, and who looked so jolly tired that he felt quite bad whenever he thought of her. The Bergfelds, Swains and Boddicks of the world—the Camden Towns, and Mile Ends—the devastated regions of France, the rock villages of Italy! Over it all what a thin crust of gentility! Members of Parliament, and ladies of fashion, like himself and Fleur,

simpering and sucking silver spoons, and now and then dropping spoons and simper, and going for each other like Kilkenny cats!

“What evidence has she got to support those words?” Michael racked his memory. This was going to be a game of bluff. That Walter Nazing and Marjorie Ferrar had flown to Paris together appeared to him of next to no importance. People could still fly in couples with impunity; and as to what had happened afterwards in the great rabbit-warren *Outre Manche*—Pff! The Bertie Curfew affair was different. Smoke of a year’s duration probably had fire behind it. He knew Bertie Curfew, the enterprising Director of the ‘*Ne Plus Ultra Play Society*,’ whose device was a stork swallowing a frog—a long young man, with long young hair that shone and was brushed back, and a long young record; a strange mixture of enthusiasm and contempt, from one to the other of which he passed with extreme suddenness. His sister, of whom he always spoke as ‘*Poor Norah*,’ in Michael’s opinion was worth ten of him. She ran a Children’s House in Bethnal Green, and had eyes from which meanness and evil shrank away.

Big Ben thumped out eight strokes; the Dandie barked, and Michael knew that Soames had come.

Very silent during dinner, Soames opened the discussion over a bottle of Lippinghall Madeira by asking to see the writ.

When Fleur had brought it, he seemed to go into a trance.

‘The old boy,’ thought Michael, ‘is thinking of his past. Wish he’d come to!’

“Well, Father?” said Fleur at last.

As if from long scrutiny of a ghostly Court of Justice, Soames turned his eyes on his daughter’s face.

"You won't eat your words, I suppose?"

Fleur tossed her now de-shingled head. "Do you want me to?"

"Can you substantiate them? You mustn't rely on what was told you—that isn't evidence."

"I know that Amabel Nazing came here and said that she didn't mind Walter flying to Paris with Marjorie Ferrar, but that she did object to not having been told beforehand, so that she herself could have flown to Paris with somebody else."

"We could subpoena that young woman," said Soames.

Fleur shook her head. "She'd never give Walter away in Court."

"H'm! What else about this Miss Ferrar?"

"Everybody knows of her relationship with Bertie Curfew."

"Yes," Michael put in, "and between 'everybody knows' and 'somebody tells' is a great gap fixed."

Soames nodded.

"She just wants money out of us," cried Fleur; "she's always hard up. As if she cared whether people thought her moral or not! She despises morality—all her set do."

"Ah! Her view of morality!" said Soames, deeply; he was suddenly seeing a British Jury confronted by a barrister describing the modern view of morals: "No need, perhaps, to go into personal details."

Michael started up.

"By Jove, sir, you've hit it! If you can get her to admit that she's read certain books, seen or acted in certain plays, danced certain dances, worn certain clothes——" He fell back again into his chair; what if the other side started asking Fleur the same questions? Was it not the fashion to keep abreast of certain things, however moral

one might really be ? Who could stand up and profess to be shocked, to-day ?

“ Well ? ” said Soames.

“ Only that one’s own point of view isn’t quite a British Jury’s, sir. Even yours and ours, I expect, don’t precisely tally.”

Soames looked at his daughter. He understood. Loose talk—afraid of being out of the fashion—evil communications corrupting all profession of good manners ! Still, no Jury could look at her face without—who could resist the sudden raising of those white lids ? Besides, she was a mother, and the other woman wasn’t ; or if she was—she shouldn’t be ! No, he held to his idea. A clever fellow at the Bar could turn the whole thing into an indictment of the fast set and modern morality, and save all the invidiousness of exposing a woman’s private life.

“ You give me the names of her set and those books and plays and dancing clubs and things,” he said. “ I’ll have the best man at the Bar.”

Michael rose from the little conference somewhat eased in mind. If the matter could be shifted from the particular to the general ; if, instead of attacking Marjorie Ferrar’s practice, the defence could attack her theory, it would not be so dreadful. Soames took him apart in the hall.

“ I shall want all the information I can get about that young man and her.”

Michael’s face fell.

“ You can’t get it from me, sir, I haven’t got it.”

“ She must be frightened,” said Soames. “ If I can frighten her, I can probably settle it out of Court without an apology.”

“ I see ; use the information out of Court, but not in.”

Soames nodded. "I shall tell them that we shall justify. Give me the young man's address."

"Macbeth Chambers, Bloomsbury. It's close to the British Museum. But do remember, sir, that to air Miss Ferrar's linen in Court will be as bad for us as for her."

Again Soames nodded.

When Fleur and her father had gone up, Michael lit a cigarette, and passed back into the 'parlour.' He sat down at the clavichord. The instrument made very little noise—so he could strum on it without fear of waking the eleventh baronet. From a Spanish tune picked up three years ago on his honeymoon, whose savagery always soothed him, his fingers wandered on: "I got a crown, you got a crown—all God's childern got a crown! Eb'ry-one da' talk 'bout 'Eaben ain't goin' dere. All God's childern got a crown."

Glass lustres on the walls gleamed out at him. As a child he had loved the colours of his aunt Pamela's glass chandeliers in the panelled rooms at Brook Street; but when he knew what was what, he and every one had laughed at them. And now lustres had come in again; and Aunt Pamela had gone out! "She had a crown—he had a crown——" Confound that tune! "*Auprès de ma blonde—il fait bon—fait bon—fait bon; Auprès de ma blonde, il fait bon dormir.*"

His 'blonde'—not so very blonde, either—would be in bed by now. Time to go up! But still he strummed on, and his mind wandered in and out—of poultry and politics, Old Forsyte, Fleur, Foggartism, and the Ferrar girl—like a man in a maelstrom whirling round with his head just above water. Who was it said the landing-place for modernity was a change of heart; the re-birth of a belief that life was worth while, and better life attainable? 'Better life?' Prerogative of priests? Not now. Human-

ity had got to save itself ! To save itself—what was that, after all, but expression of ‘ the will to live ’ ? But did humanity will to live as much as it used ? That was the point. Michael stopped strumming and listened to the silence. Not even a clock ticking—time was inhospitable in ‘ parlours ’ ; and England asleep outside. Was the English ‘ will to live ’ as strong as ever ; or had they all become so spoiled, so sensitive to life, that they had weakened on it ? Had they sucked their silver spoon so long that, threatened with a spoon of bone, they preferred to get down from table ? ‘ I don’t believe it,’ thought Michael, ‘ I won’t believe it. Only where are we going ? Where am I going ? Where are all God’s children going ? ’ To bed, it seemed !

And Big Ben struck : One.