

CHAPTER II

RESULTS

HE walked home, lighter in head and heart. That was the trouble—a light weight! No serious attention would be paid to him. He recollected the maiden speech of the Member for Cornmarket. At least he had stopped, to-day, as soon as the House began to fidget. He felt not, and hungry. Opera-singers grew fat through their voices, Members of Parliament thin. He would have a bath.

He was half clothed again when Fleur came in.

“You did splendidly, Michael. That beast!”

“Which?”

“His name’s MacGown.”

“Sir Alexander MacGown? What about him?”

“You’ll see to-morrow. He insinuated that you were interested in the sale of the Foggart book, as one of its publishers.”

“That’s rather the limit.”

“And all the rest of his speech was a cut-up; horrid tone about the whole thing. Do you know him?”

“MacGown? No. He’s Member for some Scottish borough.”

“Well, he’s an enemy. Blythe is awfully pleased with you, and wild about MacGown; and so is Bart. I’ve never seen him so angry. You’ll have to write to ‘The Times’ and explain that you’ve had no interest in Danby & Winter’s since before you were elected. Bart and your

mother are coming to dinner. Did you know she was with me ? ”

“ Mother ? She abhors politics. ”

“ All she said was : ‘ I wish dear Michael would brush his hair back before speaking. I like to see his forehead. ’ And when MacGown sat down, she said : ‘ My dear, the back of that man’s head is perfectly straight. D’you think he’s a Prussian ? And he’s got thick lobes to his ears. I shouldn’t like to be married to him ! ’ She had her opera-glasses. ”

Sir Lawrence and Lady Mont were already in the ‘ parlour ’ when they went down, standing opposite each other like two storks, if not precisely on one leg, still very distinguished. Pushing Michael’s hair up, Lady Mont pecked his forehead, and her dove-like eyes gazed at the top of his head from under their arched brows. She was altogether a little Norman in her curves ; she even arched her words. She was considered “ a deah ; but not too frightfully all there. ”

“ How did you manage to stick it, Mother ? ”

“ My dear boy, I was thrilled ; except for that person in jute. I thought the shape of his head insufferable. Where did you get all that knowledge ? It was so sensible. ”

Michael grinned. “ How did it strike you, sir ? ”

Sir Lawrence grimaced.

“ You played the *enfant terrible*, my dear. Half the party won’t like it because they’ve never thought of it ; and the other half won’t like it because they *have*. ”

“ What ! Foggartists at heart ? ”

“ Of course ; but in Office. You mustn’t support your real convictions in Office—it’s not done. ”

“ This nice room, ” murmured Lady Mont. “ When I was last here it was Chinese. And where’s the monkey ? ”

"In Michael's study, Mother. We got tired of him. Would you like to see Kit before dinner?"

Left alone, Michael and his father stared at the same object, a Louis Quinze snuff-box picked up by Soames.

"Would you take any notice of MacGown's insinuation, Dad?"

"Is that his name—the hairy haberdasher! I should."

"How?"

"Give him the lie."

"In private, in the Press, or in the House?"

"All three. In private I should merely call him a liar. In the Press you should use the words: 'Reckless disregard for truth.' And in Parliament—that you regret he 'should have been so misinformed.' To complete the crescendo you might add that men's noses have been pulled for less."

"But you don't suppose," said Michael, "that people would believe a thing like that?"

"They will believe anything, my dear, that suggests corruption in public life. It's one of the strongest traits in human nature. Anxiety about the integrity of public men would be admirable, if it wasn't so usually felt by those who have so little integrity themselves that they can't give others credit for it." Sir Lawrence grimaced, thinking of the P. P. R. S. "And talking of that—why wasn't Old Forsyte in the House to-day?"

"I offered him a seat, but he said: He hadn't been in the House since Gladstone moved the Home Rule Bill, and then only because he was afraid his father would have a fit."

Sir Lawrence screwed his eyeglass in.

"That's not clear to me," he said.

"His father had a pass, and didn't like to waste it."

"I see. That was noble of Old Forsyte."

“He said that Gladstone had been very windy.”

“Ah! They were even longer in those days. You covered your ground very quickly, Michael. I should say with practice you would do. I’ve a bit of news for Old Forsyte. Shropshire doesn’t speak to Charlie Ferrar because the third time the old man paid his debts to prevent his being posted, he made that a condition, for fear of being asked again. It’s not so lurid as I’d hoped. How’s the action?”

“The last I heard was something about administering what they call interrogatories.”

“Ah! I know. They answer you in a way nobody can make head or tail of, and that without prejudice. Then they administer them to you, and you answer in the same way; it all helps the lawyers. What is there for dinner?”

“Fleur said we’d kill the fatted calf when I’d got my speech off.”

Sir Lawrence sighed.

“I’m glad. Your mother has Vitamins again rather badly; we eat little but carrots, generally raw. French blood in a family is an excellent thing—prevents faddiness about food. Ah! here they come! . . .”

It has often been remarked that the breakfast-tables of people who avow themselves indifferent to what the Press may say of them are garnished by all the newspapers on the morning when there is anything to say. In Michael’s case this was a waste of almost a shilling. The only allusions to his speech were contained in four out of thirteen dailies. ‘The Times’ reported it (including the laughter) with condensed and considered accuracy. ‘The Morning Post’ picked out three imperial bits, prefaced by the words: ‘In a promising speech.’ ‘The Daily Telegraph’ remarked: “Among the other speakers

were Mr. Michael Mont." And 'The Manchester Guardian' observed: "The Member for Mid-Bucks in a maiden speech advocated the introduction of children into the Dominions."

Sir Alexander MacGown's speech received the added attention demanded by his extra years of Parliamentary service, but there was no allusion to the insinuation. Michael turned to Hansard. His own speech seemed more coherent than he had hoped. When Fleur came down he was still reading MacGown's.

"Give me some coffee, old thing."

Fleur gave him the coffee and leaned over his shoulder.

"This MacGown is after Marjorie Ferrar," she said; "I remember now."

Michael stirred his cup. "Dash it all! The House is free from that sort of pettiness."

"No. I remember Alison telling me—I didn't connect him up yesterday. Isn't it a disgusting speech?"

"Might be worse," said Michael, with a grin.

"As a member of the firm who published this singular production, he is doubtless interested in pressing it on the public, so that we may safely discount the enthusiasm displayed.' Doesn't that make your blood boil?"

Michael shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't you ever feel angry, Michael?"

"My dear, I was through the war. Now for 'The Times.' What shall I say?"

"SIR,

"May I trespass upon your valuable space' (that's quite safe), 'in the interests of public life—' (that keeps it impersonal) 'to—' er— Well?"

"To say that Sir Alexander MacGown in his speech

yesterday told a lie when he suggested that I was interested in the sale of Sir James Foggart's book."

"Straight," said Michael, "but they wouldn't put it in. How's this ?

" 'To draw attention to a misstatement in Sir Alexander MacGown's speech of yesterday afternoon. As a matter of fact ' (always useful) ' I ceased to have any interest whatever in the firm which published Sir James Foggart's book, "The Parlous State of England," even before I became a member of the late Parliament ; and am therefore in no way interested, as Sir Alexander MacGown suggested, in pressing it on the Public. I hesitate to assume that he meant to impugn my honour ' (must get in 'honour') ' but his words might bear that construction. My interest in the book is simply my interest in what is truly the " parlous state of England."

' Faithfully, etc.'

That do ? "

" Much too mild. Besides, I shouldn't say that you really believe the state of England is parlous. It's all nonsense, you know. I mean it's exaggerated."

" Very well," said Michael, " I'll put the state of the Country, instead. In the House I suppose I rise to a point of order. And in the Lobby to a point of disorder, probably. I wonder what 'The Evening Sun' will say ? "

'The Evening Sun,' which Michael bought on his way to the House, gave him a leader, headed : " Foggartism again," beginning as follows : " Young Hopeful, in the person of the Member for Mid-Bucks, roused the laughter of the House yesterday by his championship of the insane policy called Foggartism, to which we have already alluded in these columns " ; and so on for twenty lines of vivid disparagement. Michael gave it to the door-keeper.

In the House, after noting that MacGown was present, he rose at the first possible moment.

“Mr. Speaker, I rise to correct a statement in yesterday’s debate reflecting on my personal honour. The honourable Member for Greengow, in his speech said—” He then read the paragraph from Hansard. “It is true that I was a member of the firm which published Sir James Foggart’s book in August, 1923, but I retired from all connection with that firm in October, 1923, before ever I entered this House. I have therefore no pecuniary or other interest whatever in pressing the claims of the book, beyond my great desire to see its principles adopted.”

He sat down to some applause; and Sir Alexander MacGown rose. Michael recognised the face with the unpolitical expression he had noticed during his speech.

“I believe,” he said, “that the honourable Member for Mid-Bucks was not sufficiently interested in his own speech to be present when I made my reply to it yesterday. I cannot admit that my words bear the construction which he has put on them. I said, and I still say, that one of the publishers of a book must necessarily be interested in having the judgment which induced him to publish it vindicated by the Public. The honourable Member has placed on his head a cap which I did not intend for it.” His face came round towards Michael, grim, red, provocative.

Michael rose again.

“I am glad the honourable Member has removed a construction which others besides myself had put on his words.”

A few minutes later, with a certain unanimity, both left the House.

The papers not infrequently contain accounts of how

Mr. Swash, the honourable Member for Topcliffe, called Mr. Buckler, the honourable Member for Pooting, something unparliamentary. ("Order!") And of how Mr. Buckler retorted that Mr. Swash was something worse. ("Hear, hear!" and "Order!") And of how Mr. Swash waved his fists (*uproar*), and Mr. Buckler threw himself upon the Chair, or threw some papers. ("Order! order! order!") And of how there was great confusion, and Mr. Swash, or Mr. Buckler, was suspended, and led vociferous out of the Mother of Parliaments by the Serjeant-at-Arms, with other edifying details. The little affair between Michael and Sir Alexander went off in order wise. With an instinct of common decency, they both made for the lavatory; nor till they reached those marble halls did either take the slightest notice of the other. In front of a roller towel Michael said:

"Now, sir, perhaps you'll tell me why you behaved like a dirty dog. You knew perfectly well the construction that would be placed on your words."

Sir Alexander turned from a hair-brush.

"Take that!" he said, and gave Michael a swinging box on the ear. Staggering, Michael came up wildly with his right, and caught Sir Alexander on the nose. Their movements then became intensive. Michael was limber, Sir Alexander stocky; neither was over proficient with his fists. The affair was cut short by the honourable Member for Washbason, who had been in retirement. Coming hastily out of a door, he received simultaneously a black eye, and a blow on the diaphragm, which caused him to collapse. The speaker, now, was the Member for Washbason, in language stronger than those who knew the honourable gentleman would have supposed possible.

"I'm frightfully sorry, sir," said Michael. "It's always the innocent party who comes off worst."

"I'll dam' well have you both suspended," gasped the Member for Washbason.

Michael grinned, and Sir Alexander said: "To hell!"

"You're a couple of brawling cads!" said the Member for Washbason. "How the devil am I to speak this afternoon?"

"If you went in bandaged," said Michael, dabbing the damaged eye with cold water, "and apologised for a motor accident, you would get special hearing, and a good Press. Shall I take the silver lining out of my tie for a bandage?"

"Leave my eye alone," bellowed the Member for Washbason, "and get out, before I lose my temper!"

Michael buttoned the top of his waistcoat, loosened by Sir Alexander's grip, observed in the glass that his ear was very red, his cuff bloodstained, and his opponent still bleeding from the nose, and went out.

'Some scrap!' he thought, entering the fresher air of Westminster. 'Jolly lucky we were tucked away in there! I don't think I'll mention it!' His car was singing, and he felt rather sick, physically and mentally. The salvational splendour of Foggartism already reduced to a brawl in a lavatory! It made one doubt one's vocation. Not even the Member for Washbason, however, had come off with dignity, so that the affair was not likely to get into the papers.

Crossing the road towards home, he sighted Francis Wilmot walking West.

"Hallo!"

Francis Wilmot looked up, and seemed to hesitate. His face was thinner, his eyes deeper set; he had lost his smile.

"How is Mrs. Mont?"

"Very well, thanks. And you?"

"Fine," said Francis Wilmot. "Will you tell her I've had a letter from her cousin Jon. They're in great shape. He was mighty glad to hear I'd seen her, and sent his love."

"Thanks," said Michael, drily. "Come and have tea with us."

The young man shook his head.

"Have you cut your hand?"

Michael laughed. "No, somebody's nose."

Francis Wilmot smiled wanly. "I'm wanting to do that all the time. Whose was it?"

"A man called MacGown's."

Francis Wilmot seized Michael's hand. "It's the very nose!" Then, apparently disconcerted by his frankness, he turned on his heel and made off, leaving Michael putting one and one together.

Next morning's papers contained no allusion to the blood-letting of the day before, except a paragraph to the effect that the Member for Washbason was confined to his house by a bad cold. The Tory journals preserved a discreet silence about Foggartism; but in two organs—one Liberal and one Labour—were little leaders, which Michael read with some attention.

The Liberal screed ran thus: "The debate on the King's speech produced one effort which at least merits passing notice. The policy alluded to by the Member for Mid-Bucks under the label of Foggartism, because it emanates from that veteran Sir James Foggart, has a certain speciousness in these unsettled times, when everyone is looking for quack specifics. Nothing which departs so fundamentally from all that Liberalism stands for will command for a moment the support of any truly Liberal vote. The risk lies in its appeal to backwoodism in the Tory ranks. Loose thought and talk of a pessimistic nature always at-

tracts a certain type of mind. The state of England is not really parlous. It in no way justifies any unsound or hysterical departure from our traditional policy. But there is no disguising the fact that certain so-called thinkers have been playing for some time past with the idea of reviving a 'splendid isolation,' based (whether they admit it or not) on the destruction of Free Trade. The young Member for Mid-Bucks in his speech handled for a moment that corner-stone of Liberalism, and then let it drop; perhaps he thought it too weighty for him. But reduced to its elements, Foggartism is a plea for the abandonment of Free Trade, and a blow in the face of the League of Nations."

Michael sighed and turned to the Labour article, which was signed, and struck a more human note :

"And so we are to have our children carted off to the Antipodes as soon as they can read and write, in order that the capitalist class may be relieved of the menace lurking in Unemployment. I know nothing of Sir James Foggart, but if he was correctly quoted in Parliament yesterday by a member for an agricultural constituency, I smell Prussianism about that old gentleman. I wonder what the working man is saying over his breakfast-table? I fear the words: 'To hell!' are not altogether absent from his discourse. No, Sir James Foggart, English Labour intends to call its own hand; and with all the old country's drawbacks, still prefers it for itself and its children. We are not taking any, Sir James Foggart."

'There it is naked,' thought Michael. 'The policy ought never to have been entrusted to me. Blythe ought to have found a Labour townsman.'

Foggartism, whittled to a ghost by jealousy and class-hatred, by shibboleth, section and Party—he had a vision of it slinking through the purlieus of the House and the

corridors of the Press, never admitted to the Presence, nor accepted as flesh and blood!

"Never mind," he muttered; "I'll stick it. If one's a fool, one may as well be a blazing fool. Eh, Dan?"

The Dandie, raising his head from his paws, gave him a lustrous glance.