

CHAPTER IV

FONS ET ORIGO

TWO mornings later Michael received two letters. The first, which bore an Australian post-mark, ran thus:

"DEAR SIR,

"I hope you are well and the lady. I thought perhaps you'd like to know how we are. Well, Sir, we're not much to speak of out here after a year and a half. I consider there's too much guilt on the ginger-bread as regards Australia. The climate's all right when it isn't too dry or too wet—it suits my wife fine, but Sir when they talk about making your fortune all I can say is tell it to the marines. The people here are a funny lot they don't seem to have any use for us and I don't seem to have any use for them. They call us Pommies and treat us as if we'd took a liberty in coming to their blooming country. You'd say they wanted a few more out here, but they don't seem to think so. I often wish I was back in the old Country. My wife says we're better off here, but I don't know. Anyway they tell a lot of lies as regards emigration.

"Well, Sir, I've not forgotten your kindness. My wife says please to remember her to you and the lady.

"Yours faithfully,

"ANTHONY BICKET."

With that letter in his hand, Michael, like some psychometric medium, could see again the writer, his thin face,

prominent eyes, large ears, a shadowy figure of the London streets behind his coloured balloons. Poor little snipe—square peg in round hole wherever he might be; and all those other pegs—thousands upon thousands, that would never fit in. Pommies! Well! He wasn't recommending emigration for them; he was recommending it for those who could be shaped before their wood had set. Surely they wouldn't put that stigma on to children! He opened the other letter.

“Roll Major,
“Nr. Huntingdon.

“MY DEAR SIR,

“The disappointment I have felt since the appearance of my book was somewhat mitigated by your kind allusions to it in Parliament, and your championship of its thesis. I am an old man, and do not come to London now, but it would give me pleasure to meet you. If you are ever in this neighbourhood, I should be happy if you would lunch with me, or stay the night, as suits you best.

“With kind regards,

Faithfully yours,
JAS: FOGGART.”

He showed it to Fleur.

“If you go, my dear, you'll be bored to tears.”

“I must go,” said Michael; “Fons et Origo!”

He wrote that he would come to lunch the following day.

He was met at the station by a horse drawing a vehicle of a shape he had never before beheld. The green-liveried man to whose side he climbed introduced it with the words: “Sir James thought, sir, you'd like to see about you; so 'e sent the T cart.”

It was one of those grey late autumn days, very still, when the few leaves that are left hang listless, waiting to

be windswept. The puddled road smelled of rain; rooks rose from the stubbles as if in surprise at the sound of horses' hoofs; and the turned earth of ploughed fields had the sheen that betokened clay. To the flat landscape poplars gave a certain spirituality; and the russet-tiled farmhouse roofs a certain homeliness.

"That's the manor, sir," said the driver, pointing with his whip. Between an orchard and a group of elms, where was obviously a rookery, Michael saw a long low house of deeply weathered brick covered by Virginia creeper whose leaves had fallen. At a little distance were barns, out-houses, and the wall of a kitchen-garden. The cart turned into an avenue of limes and came suddenly on the house unprotected by a gate. Michael pulled an old iron bell. Its lingering clang produced a lingering man, who, puckering his face, said: "Mr. Mont? Sir James is expecting you. This way, sir."

Through an old low hall smelling pleasantly of wood-smoke, Michael reached a door which the puckered man closed in his face.

Sir James Foggart! Some gaitered old countryman with little grey whiskers, neat, weathered and firm-featured; or one of those short-necked John Bulls, still extant, square and weighty, with a flat top to his head, and a flat white topper on it!

The puckered man reopened the door, and said:

"Sir James will see you, sir."

Before the fire in a large room with a large hearth and many books was a huge old man, grey-bearded and grey-locked, like a superannuated British lion, in an old velvet coat with whitened seams.

He appeared to be trying to rise.

"Please don't, sir," said Michael.

"If you'll excuse me, I won't. Pleasant journey?"

"Very."

"Sit down. Much touched by your speech. First speech, I think?"

Michael bowed.

"Not the last, I hope."

The voice was deep and booming; the eyes looked up keenly, as if out of thickets, so bushy were the eyebrows, and the beard grew so high on the cheeks. The thick grey hair waved across the forehead and fell on to the coat collar. A primeval old man in a high state of cultivation. Michael was deeply impressed.

"I've looked forward to this honour, sir," he said, "ever since we published your book."

"I'm a recluse—never get out now. Tell you the truth, don't want to—see too many things I dislike. I write, and smoke my pipe. Ring the bell, and we'll have lunch. Who's this Sir Alexander MacGown?—his head wants punching!"

"No longer, sir," said Michael.

Sir James Foggart leaned back and laughed. His laugh was long, deep, slightly hollow, like a laugh in a trombone.

"Capital! And how did those fellows take your speech? Used to know a lot of 'em at one time—fathers of these fellows, grandfathers, perhaps."

"How do you know so well what England wants, sir," said Michael, suavely, "now that you never leave home?"

Sir James Foggart pointed with a large thin hand covered with hair to a table piled with books and magazines.

"Read," he said; "read everything—eyes as good as ever—seen a good deal in my day." And he was silent, as if seeing it again.

"Are you following your book up?"

"M'm! Something for 'em to read when I'm gone. Eighty-four, you know."

"I wonder," said Michael, "that you haven't had the Press down."

"Have—had 'em yesterday; three by different trains; very polite young men; but I could see they couldn't make head or tail of the old creature—too far gone, eh?"

At this moment the door was opened, and the puckered man came in, followed by a maid and three cats. They put a tray 'on Sir James' knees and another on a small table before Michael. On each tray was a partridge with chipped potatoes, spinach and bread sauce. The puckered man filled Sir James' glass with barley-water, Michael's with claret, and retired. The three cats, all tortoise-shells, began rubbing themselves against Sir James' trousers, purring loudly.

"Don't mind cats, I hope? No fish to-day, pussies!"

Michael was hungry, and finished his bird. Sir James gave most of his to the cats. They were then served with fruit salad, cheese, coffee and cigars, and everything removed, except the cats, who lay replete before the fire, curled up in a triangle.

Michael gazed through the smoke of two cigars at the fount and origin, eager, but in doubt whether it would stand pumping—it seemed so very old! Well! anyway, he must have a shot!

"You know Blythe, sir, of 'The Outpost'? He's your great supporter; I'm only a mouthpiece."

"Know his paper—best of the weeklies; but too clever by half."

"Now that I've got the chance," said Michael, "would you mind if I asked you one or two questions?"

Sir James Foggart looked at the lighted end of his cigar. "Fire ahead."

"Well, sir, can England really stand apart from Europe?"

"Can she stand with Europe? Alliances based on promise of assistance that won't be forthcoming—worse than useless."

"But suppose Belgium were invaded again, or Holland?"

"The one case, perhaps. Let that be understood. Knowledge in Europe, young man, of what England will or will not do in given cases is most important. And they've never had it. *Perfide Albion!* Heh! We always wait till the last moment to declare our policy. Great mistake. Gives the impression that we serve Time—which, with our democratic system, by the way, we generally do."

"I like that, sir," said Michael, who did not. "About wheat? How would you stabilise the price so as to encourage our growth of it?"

"Ha! My pet lamb. We want a wheat loan, Mr. Mont, and Government control. Every year the Government should buy in advance all the surplus we need and store it; then fix a price for the home farmers that gives them a good profit; and sell to the public at the average between the two prices. You'd soon see plenty of wheat grown here, and a general revival of agriculture."

"But wouldn't it raise the price of bread, sir?"

"Not it."

"And need an army of officials?"

"No. Use the present machinery properly organised."

"State trading, sir?" said Michael, with diffidence.

Sir James Foggart's voice boomed out. "Exceptional case—basic case—why not?"

"I quite agree," said Michael, hastily. "I never thought of it, but why not? . . . Now as to the opposition to child emigration in this country. Do you think it comes from the affection of parents for their children?"

“More from dislike of losing the children’s wages.”

“Still, you know,” murmured Michael, “one might well kick against losing one’s children for good at fifteen!”

“One might; human nature’s selfish, young man. Hang on to ’em and see ’em rot before one’s eyes, or grow up to worse chances than one’s own—as you say, that’s human nature.”

Michael, who had not said it, felt somewhat stunned.

“The child emigration scheme will want an awful lot of money, and organisation.”

Sir James stirred the cats with his slippered foot.

“Money! There’s still a mint of money—misapplied. Another hundred million loan—four and a half millions a year in the Budget; and a hundred thousand children at least sent out every year. In five years we should save the lot in unemployment dole.” He waved his cigar, and its ash spattered on his velvet coat.

‘Thought it would,’ said Michael to himself, knocking his own off into a coffee-cup. “But can children sent out wholesale like that be properly looked after, and given a real chance, sir?”

“Start gradually; where there’s a will there’s a way.”

“And won’t they just swell the big towns out there?”

“Teach ’em to want land, and give it ’em.”

“I don’t know if it’s enough,” said Michael, boldly; “the lure of the towns is terrific.”

Sir James nodded. “A town’s no bad thing till it’s overdone, as they are here. Those that go to the towns will increase the demand for our supplies.”

‘Well,’ thought Michael, ‘I’m getting on. What shall I ask him next?’ And he contemplated the cats, who were stirring uneasily. A peculiar rumbling noise had taken possession of the silence. Michael looked up. Sir James Foggart was asleep! In repose he was more tre-

mendous than ever—perhaps rather too tremendous; for his snoring seemed to shake the room. The cats tucked their heads farther in. There was a slight smell of burning. Michael picked a fallen cigar from the carpet. What should he do now? Wait for a revival, or clear out? Poor old boy! Foggartism had never seemed to Michael a more forlorn hope than in this sanctum of its fount and origin. Covering his ears, he sat quite still. One by one the cats got up. Michael looked at his watch. ‘I shall lose my train,’ he thought, and tiptoed to the door, behind a procession of deserting cats. It was as though Foggartism were snoring the little of its life away! “Good-bye, sir!” he said softly, and went out. He walked to the station very thoughtful. Foggartism! That vast if simple programme seemed based on the supposition that human beings could see two inches before their noses. But was that supposition justified; if so, would England be so town-ridden and over-populated? For one man capable of taking a far and comprehensive view and going to sleep on it, there were nine—if not nine-and-ninety—who could take near and partial views and remain wide awake. Practical politics! The answer to all wisdom, however you might boom it out. “Oh! Ah! Young Mont—not a practical politician!” It was public death to be so labelled. And Michael, in his railway-carriage, with his eyes on the English grass, felt like a man on whom every one was heaping earth. Had pelicans crying in the wilderness a sense of humour? If not, their time was poor. Grass, grass, grass! Grass and the towns! And, nestling his chin into his heavy coat, he was soon faster asleep than Sir James Foggart.