

CHAPTER VI

MICHAEL VISITS BETHNAL GREEN

THE feeling of depression with which Michael had come back from the fount and origin was somewhat mitigated by letters he was receiving from people of varying classes, nearly all young. They were so nice and earnest. They made him wonder whether after all practical politicians were not too light-hearted, like the managers of music-halls who protected the Public carefully from their more tasteful selves. They made him feel that there might be a spirit in the country that was not really represented in the House, or even in the Press. Among these letters was one which ran :

“Sunshine House,
“Bethnal Green.

“DEAR MR. MONT,

“I was so awfully glad to read your speech in ‘The Times.’ I instantly got Sir James Foggart’s book. I think the whole policy is simply splendid. You’ve no idea how heart-breaking it is for us who try to do things for children, to know that whatever we do is bound to be snowed under by the life they go to when school age ends. We have a good opportunity here of seeing the realities of child life in London. It’s wonderful to see the fondness of the mothers for the little ones, in spite of their own hard lives—though not all, of course, by any means ; but we often notice, and I think it’s common experience, that when the children get beyond ten or twelve, the fondness

for them begins to assume another form. I suppose it's really the commercial possibilities of the child making themselves felt. When money comes in at the door, disinterested love seems to move towards the window. I suppose it's natural, but it's awfully sad, because the commercial possibilities are generally so miserable; and the children's after-life is often half ruined for the sake of the few shillings they earn. I do fervently hope something will come of your appeal; only—things move so slowly, don't they? I wish you would come down and see our House here. The children are adorable, and we try to give them sunshine.

“Sincerely yours,

“NORAH CURFEW.”

Bertie Curfew's sister! But surely that case would not really come to anything! Grateful for encouragement, and seeking light on Foggartism, he decided to go. Perhaps Norah Curfew would take the little Boddicks! He suggested to Fleur that she should accompany him, but she was afraid of picking up something unsuitable to the eleventh baronet, so he went alone.

The house, facing the wintry space called Bethnal Green, consisted of three small houses converted into one, with their three small back yards, trellised round and gravelled, for a playground. Over the door were the words: SUNSHINE HOUSE, in gold capitals. The walls were cream-coloured, the woodwork dark, and the curtains of gay chintz. Michael was received in the entrance-lobby by Norah Curfew herself. Tall, slim and straight, with dark hair brushed back from a pale face, she had brown eyes, clear, straight and glowing.

‘Gosh!’ thought Michael, as she wrung his hand. ‘She is swept and garnished. No basement in her soul!’

"It *was* good of you to come, Mr. Mont. Let me take you over the house. This is the playroom."

Michael entered a room of spotless character, which had evidently been formed from several knocked into one. Six small children dressed in blue linen were seated on the floor, playing games. They embraced the knees of Norah Curfew when she came within reach. With the exception of one little girl Michael thought them rather ugly.

"These are our residents. The others only come out of school hours. We have to limit them to fifty, and that's a pretty good squeeze. We want funds to take the next two houses."

"How many of you are working here?"

"Six. Two of us do the cooking; one the accounts; and the rest washing, mending, games, singing, dancing, and general chores. Two of us live in."

"I don't see your harps and crowns."

Norah Curfew smiled.

"Pawnd," she said.

"What do you do about religion?" asked Michael, thinking of the eleventh baronet's future.

"Well, on the whole we don't. You see, they're none of them more than twelve; and the religious age, when it begins at all, begins with sex about fourteen. We just try to teach kindness and cheerfulness. I had my brother down the other day. He's always laughed at me; but he's going to do a *matinée* for us, and give us the proceeds."

"What play?"

"I think it's called 'The Plain Dealer.' He says he's always wanted to do it for a good object."

Michael stared. "Do you know 'The Plain Dealer'?"

"No; it's by one of the Restoration people, isn't it?"

"Wycherley."

"Oh! yes!" Her eyes remaining clearer than the dawn, Michael thought: 'Poor dear! It's not my business to queer the pitch of her money-getting; but Master Bertie likes his little joke!'

"I must bring my wife down here," he said; "she'd love your walls and curtains. And I wanted to ask you—You haven't room, have you, for two more little girls, if we pay for them? Their father's down and out, and I'm starting him in the country—no mother."

Norah Curfew wrinkled her straight brows, and on her face came the look Michael always connected with haloes, an anxious longing to stretch good-will beyond power and pocket.

"Oh! we must!" she said. "I'll manage somehow. What are their names?"

"Boddick—Christian, I don't know. I call them by their ages—Four and Five."

"Give me the address. I'll go and see them myself; if they haven't got anything catching, they shall come."

"You really are an angel," said Michael, simply.

Norah Curfew coloured, and opened a door. "That's silly," she said, still more simply. "This is our mess-room."

It was not large, and contained a girl working a typewriter, who stopped with her hands on the keys and looked round; another girl beating up eggs in a bowl, who stopped reading a book of poetry; and a third, who seemed practising a physical exercise, and stopped with her arms extended.

"This is Mr. Mont," said Norah Curfew, "who made that splendid speech in the House. Miss Betts, Miss La Fontaine, Miss Beeston."

The girls bowed, and the one who continued to beat the eggs, said: "It was bully."

Michael also bowed. "Beating the air, I'm afraid."

"Oh! but, Mr. Mont, it must have an effect. It said what so many people are really thinking."

"Ah!" said Michael, "but their thoughts are so deep, you know."

"Do sit down."

Michael sat on the end of a peacock-blue divan.

"I was born in South Africa," said the egg-beater, "and I know what's waiting."

"My father was in the House," said the girl, whose arms had come down to her splendid sides. "He was very much struck. Anyway, we're jolly grateful."

Michael looked from one to the other.

"I suppose if you didn't all believe in things, you wouldn't be doing this? *You* don't think the shutters are up in England, anyway?"

"Good Lord, no!" said the girl at the typewriter; "you've only to live among the poor to know that."

"The poor haven't got every virtue, and the rich haven't got every vice—that's nonsense!" broke in the physical exerciser.

Michael murmured soothingly.

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was wondering whether something doesn't hang over our heads too much?"

"D'you mean poison-gas?"

"Partly; and town blight, and a feeling that Progress has been found out."

"Well, I don't know," replied the egg-beater, who was dark and pretty. "I used to think so in the war. But Europe isn't the world. Europe isn't even very important, really. The sun hardly shines there, anyway."

Michael nodded. "After all, if the Millennium comes and we do blot each other out, in Europe, it'll only mean another desert about the size of the Sahara, and the loss

of a lot of people obviously too ill-conditioned to be fit to live. It'd be a jolly good lesson to the rest of the world, wouldn't it? Luckily the other continents are far off each other."

"Cheerful!" exclaimed Norah Curfew.

Michael grinned.

"Well, one can't help catching the atmosphere of this place. I admire you all frightfully, you know, giving up everything, to come and do this."

"That's tosh," said the girl at the typewriter. "What is there to give up—bunny-hugging? One got used to doing things, in the war."

"If it comes to that," said the egg-beater, "we admire you much more, for not giving up Parliament."

Again Michael grinned.

"Miss La Fontaine—wanted in the kitchen!"

The egg-beater went towards the door.

"Can you beat eggs? D'you mind—shan't be a minute." Handing Michael the bowl and fork, she vanished.

"What a shame!" said Norah Curfew. "Let me!"

"No," said Michael; "I can beat eggs with anybody. What do you all feel about cutting children adrift at fourteen?"

"Well, of course, it'll be bitterly opposed," said the girl at the typewriter. "They'll call it inhuman, and all that. It's much more inhuman really to keep them here."

"The real trouble," said Norah Curfew, "apart from the shillings earned, is the class-interference idea. Besides, Imperialism isn't popular."

"I should jolly well think it isn't," muttered the physical exerciser.

"Ah!" said the typist, "but this isn't Imperialism, is it, Mr. Mont? It's all on the lines of making the Dominions the equal of the Mother Country."

Michael nodded. "Commonwealth."

"That won't prevent their camouflaging their objection to losing the children's wages," said the physical exerciser.

A close discussion ensued between the three young women as to the exact effect of children's wages on the working-class budget. Michael beat his eggs and listened. It was, he knew, a point of the utmost importance. The general conclusion seemed to be that children earned on the whole 'rather more than their keep, but that it was 'very short-sighted in the long run,' because it fostered surplus population and unemployment, and a "great shame" to spoil the children's chances for the sake of the parents.

The re-entrance of the egg-beater put a stop to it.

"They're beginning to come in, Norah."

The physical exerciser slipped out, and Norah Curfew said :

"Now, Mr. Mont, would you like to see them ?"

Michael followed her. He was thinking: 'I wish Fleur had come!' These girls seemed really to believe in things.

Down-stairs the children were trickling in from school. He stood and watched them. They seemed a queer blend of anæmia and vitality, of effervescence and obedience. Unselfconscious as puppies, but old beyond their years; and yet, looking as if they never thought ahead. Each movement, each action was as if it were their last. They were very quick. Most of them carried something to eat in a paper bag, or a bit of grease-paper. They chattered, and didn't laugh. Their accent struck Michael as deplorable. Six or seven at most were nice to look at; but nearly all looked good-tempered, and none seemed to be selfish. Their movements were jerky. The mobbed Norah Curfew and the physical exerciser; obeyed without question,

ate without appetite, and grabbed at the house-cat. Michael was fascinated.

With them came four or five mothers, who had questions to ask, or bottles to fill. They too were on perfect terms with the young women. Class did not exist in this house; only personality was present. He noticed that the children responded to his grin, that the women didn't, though they smiled at Norah Curfew and the physical exerciser; he wondered if they would give him a bit of their minds if they knew of his speech.

Norah Curfew accompanied him to the door.

"Aren't they ducks?"

"I'm afraid if I saw much of them, I should give up Foggartism."

"Oh! but why?"

"Well, you see it designs to make them men and women of property."

"You mean that would spoil them?"

Michael grinned. "There's something dangerous about silver spoons. Here's my initiation fee." He handed her all his money.

"Oh! Mr. Mont, we didn't——!"

"Well, give me back sixpence, otherwise I shall have to walk home."

"It's frightfully kind of you. Do come again; and please don't give up Foggartism."

He walked to the train thinking of her eyes; and, on reaching home, said to Fleur:

"You absolutely must come and see that place. It's quite clean, and the spirit's topping. It's bucked me up like anything. Norah Curfew's perfectly splendid."

Fleur looked at him between her lashes.

"Oh!" she said. "I will."