

## CHAPTER VII

### CONTRASTS

THE land beyond the coppice at Lippinghall was a ten-acre bit of poor grass, chalk and gravel, fenced round, to show that it was property. Except for one experiment with goats, abandoned because nobody would drink their milk in a country that did not demean itself by growing food, nothing had been done with it. By December this poor relation of Sir Lawrence Mont's estate was being actively exploited. Close to the coppice the hut had been erected, and at least an acre converted into a sea of mud. The coppice itself presented an incised and draggled appearance, owing to the ravages of Henry Boddick and another man, who had cut and stacked a quantity of timber, which a contractor was gradually rejecting for the fowl-house and granary. The incubator-house was at present in the nature of a prophecy. Progress, in fact, was somewhat slow, but it was hoped that fowls might be asked to begin their operations soon after the New Year. In the meantime Michael had decided that the colony had better get the worst over and go into residence. Scraping the Manor House for furniture, and sending in a store of groceries, oil-lamps, and soap, he installed Boddick on the left, earmarked the centre for the Bergfelds, and the right hand for Swain. He was present when the Manor car brought them from the station. The murky day was turning cold, the trees dripped, the car-wheels splashed up the surface water.

From the doorway of the hut Michael watched them get out, and thought he had never seen three more untimely creatures. Bergfeld came first; having only one suit, he had put it on, and looked what he was—an actor out of a job. Mrs. Bergfeld came second, and having no outdoor coat, looked what she was—nearly frozen. Swain came last. On his shadowy face was nothing quite so spirited as a sneer; but he gazed about him, and seemed to say: ‘My hat!’

Boddick, with a sort of prescience, was absent in the coppice. ‘He,’ thought Michael, ‘is my only joy!’

Taking them into the kitchen messroom of the hut, he deployed a thermos of hot coffee, a cake, and a bottle of rum.

“Awfully sorry things look so dishevelled; but I think the hut’s dry, and there are plenty of blankets. These oil-lamps smell rather. You were in the war, Mr. Swain; you’ll feel at home in no time. Mrs. Bergfeld, you look so cold, do put some rum into your coffee; we always do when we go over the top.”

They all put rum into their coffee, which had a marked effect. Mrs. Bergfeld’s cheeks grew pink, and her eyes darkened. Swain remarked that the hut was a ‘bit of all right’; Bergfeld began making a speech. Michael checked him. “Boddick knows all the ropes. I’m afraid I’ve got to catch a train; I’ve only just time to show you round.”

While whirling back to town afterwards he felt that he had, indeed, abandoned his platoon just as it was going over the top. That night he would be dining in Society; there would be light and warmth, jewels and pictures, wine and talk; the dinner would cost the board of his ‘down and outs’ for a quarter at least; and nobody would give them and their like a thought. If he

ventured to draw Fleur's attention to the contrast, she would say :

"My dear boy, that's like a book by Gurdon Minho ; you're getting sentimental." And he would feel a fool. Or would he ? Would he not, perhaps, look at her small distinguished head, and think : ' Too easy a way out, my dear ; those who take it have little heads ! ' And, then, his eyes, straying farther down to that white throat and all the dainty loveliness below, would convey a warmth to his blood and a warning to his brain not to give way to blasphemy, lest it end by disturbing bliss. For what with Foggartism, poultry, and the rest of it, Michael had serious thoughts sometimes that Fleur had none ; and with wisdom born of love, he knew that if she hadn't, she never would have, and he must get used to it. She was what she was, and could be converted only in popular fiction. Excellent business for the self-centred heroine to turn from interest in her own belongings to interest in people who had none ; but in life it wasn't done. Fleur at least camouflaged her self-concentration gracefully ; and with Kit—! Ah ! but Kit was herself !

So he did not mention his ' down and outs ' on their way to dinner in Eaton Square. He took instead a lesson in the royal Personage named on their invitation card, and marvelled at Fleur's knowledge. " She's interested in social matters. And do remember, Michael, not to sit down till she asks you to, and not to get up before her, and to say ' ma'am. ' "

Michael grinned. " I suppose they'll all be nob's, or sn—er—why the deuce did they ask us ? "

But Fleur was silent, thinking of her curtsy.

Royalty was affable, the dinner short but superb, served and eaten off gold plate, at a rate which suited the impression that there really wasn't a moment to spare.

Fleur took a mental note of this new necessity. She knew personally five of the twenty-four diners, and the rest as in an illustrated paper, darkly. She had seen them all there at one time or another, stepping hideously in paddocks, photographed with their offspring or their dogs, about to reply for the Colonies, or 'taking a lunar' at a flying grouse. Her quick instinct apprehended almost at once the reason why she and Michael had been invited. His speech! Like some new specimen at the Zoo, he was an object of curiosity, a stunt. She saw people nodding in the direction of him, seated opposite her between two ladies covered with flesh and pearls. Excited and very pretty, she flirted with the Admiral on her right, and defended Michael with spirit from the Under-Secretary on her left. The Admiral grew warm, the Under-Secretary, too young for emotion, cold.

"A little knowledge, Mrs. Mont," he said at the end of his short second innings, "is a dangerous thing."

"Now where have I heard that?" said Fleur. "Is it in the Bible?"

The Under-Secretary tilted his chin.

"We who have to work Departments know too much, perhaps; but your husband certainly doesn't know enough. Foggartism is an amusing idea, but there it stops."

"We shall see!" said Fleur. "What do you say, Admiral?"

"Foggartism! What's that—new kind of death ray? I saw a fellow yesterday, Mrs. Mont—give you my word!—who's got a ray that goes through three bullocks, a nine-inch brick wall, and gives a shock to a donkey on the other side; and only at quarter strength."

Fleur flashed a look round towards the Under-Secretary, who had turned his shoulder, and, leaning towards the Admiral, murmured:

“ I wish you'd give a shock to the donkey on *my* other side ; he wants it, and I'm not nine inches thick.”

But before the Admiral could shoot his death ray, Royalty had risen.

In the apartment to which Fleur was withdrawn, she had been saying little for some minutes, and noticing much, when her hostess came up and said :

“ My dear, Her Royal Highness——”

Fleur followed, retaining every wit.

A frank and simple hand patted the sofa beside her. Fleur sat down. A frank and simple voice said :

“ What an interesting speech your husband made ! It was so refreshing, I thought.”

“ Yes, ma'am,” said Fleur ; “ but there it will stop, I am told.”

A faint smile curled lips guiltless of colouring matter.

“ Well, perhaps. Has he been long in Parliament ? ”

“ Only a year.”

“ Ah ! I liked his taking up the cudgels for the children.”

“ Some people think he's proposing a new kind of child slavery.”

“ Oh ! really ! Have you any children ? ”

“ One,” said Fleur, and added honestly : “ And I must say I wouldn't part with him at fourteen.”

“ Ah ! And have you been long married ? ”

“ Four years.”

At this moment the royal lady saw some one else she wished to speak to, and was compelled to break off the conversation, which she did very graciously, leaving Fleur with the feeling that she had been disappointed with the rate of production.

In the cab trailing its way home through the foggy night, she felt warm and excited, and as if Michael wasn't.

"What's the matter, Michael?"

His hand came down on her knee at once.

"Sorry, old thing! Only, really—when you think of it—eh?"

"Of what? You were quite a li— object of interest."

"The whole thing's a game. Anything for novelty!"

"The Princess was very nice about you."

"Ah! Poor thing! But I suppose you get used to anything!"

Fleur laughed. Michael went on:

"Any new idea gets seized and talked out of existence. It never gets farther than the brain, and the brain gets bored; and there it is, already a back number!"

"That can't be true, Michael. What about Free Trade, or Woman Suffrage?"

Michael squeezed her knee. "All the women say to me: 'But how interesting, Mr. Mont; I think it's most thrilling!' And the men say: 'Good stunt, Mont! But not practical politics, of course.' And I've only one answer: 'Things as big got done in the war.' By George, it's foggy!"

They were going, indeed, at a snail's pace, and through the windows could see nothing but the faint glow of the street-lamps emerging slowly, high up, one by one. Michael let down a window, and leaned out.

"Where are we?"

"Gawd knows, sir."

Michael coughed, put up the window again, and resumed his clutch of Fleur.

"By the way, Wastwater asked me if I'd read 'Canthar.' He says there's a snorting cut-up of it in 'The Protagonist.' It'll have the usual effect—send sales up."

"They say it's very clever."

"Horribly out of drawing—not fit for children, and

tells adults nothing they don't know. I don't see how it can be justified."

"Genius, my dear. If it's attacked, it'll be defended."

"Sib Swan won't have it—he says it's muck."

"Oh! yes; but Sib's getting a back number."

"That's very true," said Michael, thoughtfully. "By Jove! how fast things move, except in politics, and fog."

Their cab had come to a standstill. Michael let down the window again.

"I'm fair lost, sir," said the driver's hoarse voice. "Ought to be near the Embankment, but for the life of me I can't find the turning." Michael buttoned his coat, put up the window again, and got out on the near side.

The night was smothered, alive only with the continual hootings of creeping cars. The black vapour, acrid and cold, surged into Michael's lungs.

"I'll walk beside you; we're against the curb; creep on till we strike the river, or a bobby."

The cab crept on, and Michael walked beside it, feeling with his foot for the curb.

The refined voice of an invisible man said: "This is sanguinary!"

"It is," said Michael. "Where are we?"

"In the twentieth century, and the heart of civilisation."

Michael laughed, and regretted it; the fog tasted of filth.

"Think of the police!" said the voice, "having to be out in this all night!"

"Splendid force, the police!" replied Michael. "Where are you, sir?"

"Here, sir. Where are you?"

It was the exact position. The blurred moon of a lamp glowed suddenly above Michael's head. The cab ceased to move.

"If I could only smell the 'Ouses of Parliament," said the cabman. "They'll be 'avin' supper there be now."

"Listen!" said Michael—Big Ben was striking. "That was to our left."

"At our back," said the cabman.

"Can't be, or we should be in the river; unless you've turned right round!"

"Gawd knows where I've turned," said the cabman, sneezing. "Never saw such a night!"

"There's only one thing for it—drive on until we hit something. Gently does it."

The cabman started the cab, and Michael, with his hand on it, continued to feel for the curb with his foot.

"Steady!" he said, suddenly. "Car in front." There was a slight bump.

"Nah then!" said a voice. "Where yer comin' ? Cawn't yer see ?"

Michael moved up alongside of what seemed to be another taxi.

"Comin' along at that pice!" said its driver; "and full moon, too!"

"Awfully sorry," said Michael. "No harm done. You got any sense of direction left?"

"The pubs are all closed—worse luck! There's a bloomin' car in front o' me that I've hit three times. Can't make any impression on it. The driver's dead, I think. Would yer go and look, Guv'nor?"

Michael moved towards the loom in front. But at that moment it gave way to the more universal blackness. He ran four steps to hail the driver, stumbled off the curb, fell, picked himself up and spun round. He moved along the curb to his right, felt he was going wrong, stopped, and called: "Hallo!" A faint "Hallo!" replied from—where? He moved what he thought was back,

and called again. No answer! Fleur would be frightened! He shouted. Half a dozen faint hallos replied to him; and someone at his elbow said: "Don't cher know where y'are?"

"No; do you?"

"What do you think? Lost anything?"

"Yes; my cab."

"Left anything in it?"

"My wife."

"I awd! You won't get 'er back to-night." A hoarse laugh, ghostly and obscene, floated by. A bit of darkness loomed for a moment, and faded out. Michael stood still. 'Keep your head!' he thought. 'Here's the curb—either they're in front, or they're behind; or else I've turned a corner.' He stepped forward along the curb. Nothing! He stepped back. Nothing! "What the blazes have I done?" he muttered: "or have they moved on?" Sweat poured down him in spite of the cold. Fleur would be really scared! And the words of his election address sprang from his lips: "Chiefly by the climination of smoke!"

"Ah!" said a voice, "got a cigarette, Guv'nor?"

"I'll give you all I've got and half a crown, if you'll find a cab close by with a lady in it. What street's this?"

"Don't arst me! The streets 'ave gone mad, I think."

"Listen!" said Michael sharply.

"That's right, 'Some one callin' so sweet.'"

"Hallo!" cried Michael. "Fleur!"

"Here! Here!"

It sounded to his right, to his left, behind him, in front. Then came the steady blowing of a cab's horn.

"Now we've got 'em," said the bit of darkness. "This way, Guv'nor, step slow, and mind my corns!"

Michael yielded to a tugging at his coat.

"It's like No-Man's Land in a smoke barrage!" said his guide.

"You're right. Hallo! Coming!"

The horn sounded a yard off. A voice said: "Oh! Michael!"

His face touched Fleur's in the window of the cab.

"Just a second, darling. There you are, my friend, and thanks awfully! Hope you'll get home!"

"I've 'ad worse nights out than this. Thank you, Captain! Wish you and the lady luck." There was a sound of feet shuffling on, and the fog sighed out: "So long!"

"All right, sir," said the hoarse voice of Michael's cabman. "I know where I am now. First on the left, second on the right. I'll bump the curb till I get there. Thought you was swallowed up, sir!"

Michael got into the cab, and clasped Fleur close. She uttered a long sigh, and sat quite still.

"Nothing more scaring than a fog!" he said.

"I thought you'd been run over!"

Michael was profoundly touched.

"Awfully sorry, darling. And you've got all that beastly fog down your throat. We'll drown it out when we get in. That poor chap was an ex-Service man. Wonderful the way the English keep their humour and don't lose their heads."

"I lost mine!"

"Well, you've got it back," said Michael, pressing it against his own to hide the emotion he was feeling. "Fog's our sheet-anchor, after all. So long as we have fog, England will survive." He felt Fleur's lips against his.

He belonged to her, and she couldn't afford to have him straying about in fogs or Foggartism! Was that the——? And then he yielded to the thrill.

The cabman was standing by the opened door. "Now, sir, I'm in your Square. P'r'aps you know your own 'ouse."

Wrenched from the kiss, Michael stammered "Righto!" The fog was thinner here; he could consult the shape of trees. "On and to your right, third house."

There it was—desirable—with its bay-trees in its tubs and its fanlight shining. He put his latch-key in the door.

"A drink?" he said.

The cabman coughed: "I won't say no, sir."

Michael brought the drink.

"Far to go?"

"Near Putney Bridge. Your 'ealth, sir!"

Michael watched his pinched face drinking.

"Sorry you've got to plough into that again!"

The cabman handed back the glass.

"Thank'ee, sir; I shall be all right now; keep along the river, and down the Fulham Road. Thought they couldn't lose me in London. Where I went wrong was trying for a short cut instead of takin' the straight road round. 'Ope the young lady's none the worse, sir. She was properly scared while you was out there in the dark. These fogs ain't fit for 'uman bein's. They ought to do somethin' about 'em in Parliament."

"They ought!" said Michael, handing him a pound note. "Good night, and good luck!"

"It's an ill wind!" said the cabman, starting his cab. "Good night, sir, and thank you kindly."

"Thank *you!*" said Michael.

The cab ground slowly away, and was lost to sight.

Michael went in to the Spanish room. Fleur, beneath the Goya, was boiling a silver kettle, and burning pastilles. What a contrast to the world outside—its black malodorous cold reek, its risk and fear! In this pretty

glowing room, with this pretty glowing woman, why think of its tangle, lost shapes, and straying cries ?

Lighting his cigarette, he took his drink from her by its silver handle, and put it to his lips.

“ I really think we ought to have a car, Michael ! ”