

## CHAPTER X

### PHOTOGRAPHY

**S**UMMONED to the annual Christmas covert-shooting at Lippinghall, Michael found there two practical politicians, and one member of the Government.

In the mullion-windowed smoking-room, where men retired, and women too sometimes, into chairs old, soft, leathery, the ball of talk was lightly tossed, and naught so devastating as Foggartism mentioned. But in odd minutes and half-hours Michael gained insight into political realities, and respect for practical politicians. Even on this holiday they sat up late, got up early, wrote letters, examined petitions, dipped into Blue Books. They were robust, ate heartily, took their liquor like men, never seemed fatigued. They shaved clean, looked healthy, and shot badly with enjoyment. The member of the Government played golf instead, and Fleur went round with him. Michael learned the lesson: Have so much on your mind that you have practically nothing in it; no time to pet your schemes, fancies, feelings. Carry on, and be careful that you don't know to what end.

As for Foggartism, they didn't—*à la* 'Evening Sun'—pooh-pooh it; they merely asked, as Michael had often asked himself: "Yes, but how are you going to work it? Your scheme might be very good, if it didn't hit people's pockets. Any addition to the price of living is out of the question—the country's taxed up to the hilt. Your Foggartism's going to need money in every direction. You

may swear till you're blue in the face that ten or twenty years hence it'll bring fivefold return ; nobody will listen. You may say : ' Without it we're all going to the devil ' ; but we're accustomed to that—some people think we're there already, and they resent its being said. Others, especially manufacturers, believe what they want to. They can't bear any one who cries ' stinking fish,' whatever his object. Talk about reviving trade, and less taxation, or offer more wages and talk of a capital levy, and, according to Party, we shall believe you've done the trick—until we find you haven't. But you're talking of less trade and more taxation in the present with a view to a better future. Great Scott ! In politics you can shuffle the cards, but you mustn't add or subtract. People only react to immediate benefit, or, as in the war, to imminent danger. You must cut out sensationalism."

In short, they were intelligent, and completely fatalistic.

After these quiet talks, Michael understood, much better than before, the profession of politics. He was greatly attracted by the member of the Government ; his personality was modest, his manner pleasant, he had Departmental ideas, and was doing his best with his own job according to those ideas ; if he had others he kept them to himself. He seemed to admire Fleur, and he listened better than the other two. He said, too, some things they hadn't. " Of course, what we're able to do may be found so inadequate that there'll be a great journalistic outcry, and under cover of it we may bring in some sweeping measures that people will swallow before they know what they're in for."

" The Press," said Michael ; " I don't see them helping."

" Well ! It's the only voice there is. If you could get fast hold of the vociferous papers, you might even put your Foggartism over. What you're really up against is

the slow town growth of the last hundred and fifty years, an ingrained state of mind which can only see England in terms of industrialism and the carrying trade. And in the town-mind, of course, hope springs eternal. They don't like calamity talk. Some genuinely think we can go on indefinitely on the old lines, and get more and more prosperous into the bargain. Personally, I don't. It's possible that much of what old Foggart advocates may be adopted bit by bit, even child emigration, from sheer practical necessity; but it won't be called Foggartism. Inventor's luck! *He'll* get no credit for being the first to see it. And," added the Minister, gloomily, "by the time it's adopted, it'll probably be too late."

Receiving the same day a request for an interview from a Press Syndicate whose representative would come down to suit his convenience, Michael made the appointment, and prepared an elaborate exposition of his faith. The representative, however, turned out to be a camera, and a photograph entitled: 'The Member for Mid-Bucks expounding Foggartism to our Representative,' became the only record of it. The camera was active. It took a family group in front of the porch: 'Right to Left, Mr. Michael Mont, M.P., Lady Mont, Mrs. Michael Mont, Sir Lawrence Mont, Bt.' It took Fleur: 'Mrs. Michael Mont, with Kit and Dandie.' It took the Jacobean wing. It took the Minister, with his pipe, 'enjoying a Christmas rest.' It took a corner of the walled garden: 'In the grounds.' It then had lunch. After lunch it took the whole house-party: 'At Sir Lawrence Mont's, Lippinghall Manor, Bucks'; with the Minister on Lady Mont's right and the Minister's wife on Sir Lawrence's left. This photograph would have turned out better, if the Dandie, inadvertently left out, had not made a sudden onslaught on the camera's legs. It took a photograph of Fleur alone:

'Mrs. Michael Mont—a charming young Society hostess.' It understood that Michael was making an interesting practical experiment—could it take Foggartism in action? Michael grinned and said: Yes, if it would take a walk, too.

They departed for the coppice. The colony was in its normal state—Boddick, with two of the contractor's men cheering him on, was working at the construction of the incubator-house; Swain, smoking a cigarette, was reading 'The Daily Mail'; Bergfeld was sitting with his head in his hands, and Mrs. Bergfeld was washing up.

The camera took three photographs. Michael, who had noted that Bergfeld had begun shaking, suggested to the camera that it would miss its train. It at once took a final photograph of Michael in front of the hut, two cups of tea at the Manor, and its departure.

As Michael was going up-stairs that night, the butler came to him.

"The man Boddick's in the pantry, Mr. Michael; I'm afraid something's happened, sir."

"Oh!" said Michael, blankly.

Where Michael had spent many happy hours, when he was young, was Boddick, his pale face running with sweat, and his dark eyes very alive.

"The German's gone, sir."

"Gone?"

"Hanged himself. The woman's in an awful state. I cut him down, and sent Swain to the village."

"Good God! Hanged! But why?"

"He's been very funny these last three days; and that camera upset him properly. Will you come, sir?"

They set out with a lantern, Boddick telling his tale.

"As soon as ever you was gone this afternoon he started to shake and carry on about having been made

game of. I told 'im not to be a fool, and went out to get on with it. But when I came in to tea, he was still shakin', and talkin' about his honour and his savin's; Swain had got fed-up and was jeerin' at him, and Mrs. Bergfeld was as white as a ghost in the corner. I told Swain to shut his head; and Fritz simmered down after a bit, and sat humped up as he does for hours together. Mrs. Bergfeld got our tea. I had some chores to finish, so I went out after. When I come in at seven, they was at it again hammer and tongs, and Mrs. Bergfeld cryin' fit to bust her heart. 'Can't you see,' I said, 'how you're upsettin' your wife?' 'Henry Boddick,' he said, 'I've nothing against *you*, you've always been decent to me. But this Swain,' he said, 'his name is Swine!' and he took up the bread-knife. I got it away from him, and spoke him calm. 'Ah!' he said, 'but *you've* no pride.' Swain was lookin' at him with that sort o' droop in his mouth he's got. 'Pride,' he says, 'you silly blighter, what call 'ave *you* to 'ave any pride?' Well, I see that while we was there he wasn't goin' to get any better, so I took Swain off for a glass at the pub. When we came back at ten o'clock, Swain went straight to bed, and I went into the mess-room, where I found his wife alone. 'Has he gone to bed?' I said. 'No,' she said, 'he's gone out to cool his head. Oh! Henry Boddick,' she said, 'I don't know what to do with him!' We sat there a bit, she tellin' me about 'im brooding, and all that—nice woman she is, too; till suddenly she said: 'Henry Boddick,' she said, 'I'm frightened. Why don't he come?' We went out to look for him, and where d'you think he was, sir? You know that big tree we're just goin' to have down? There's a ladder against it, and the guidin' rope all fixed. He'd climbed up that ladder in the moonlight, put the rope round his neck, and jumped off; and there he was, six

feet from the ground, dead as a duck. I roused up Swain, and we got him in, and— Well, we 'ad a proper time! Poor woman, I'm sorry for her, sir—though really I think it's just as well he's gone—he couldn't get upsides with it anyhow. That camera chap would have given something for a shot at what we saw there in the moonlight."

'Foggartism in action!' thought Michael, bitterly. 'So endeth the First Lesson!'

The hut looked lonely in the threading moonlight and the bitter wind. Inside, Mrs. Bergfeld was kneeling beside the body placed on the deal table, with a handkerchief over its face. Michael put a hand on her shoulder. She gave him a wild look, bowed her head again, and her lips began moving. 'Prayer!' thought Michael. 'Catholic—of course!' He took Boddick aside. "Don't let her see Swain. I'll talk to him."

When the police and the doctor came in, he button-holed the hair-dresser, whose shadowy face looked ghastly in the moonlight. He seemed much upset.

"You'd better come down to the house for the night, Swain."

"All right, sir. I never meant to hurt the poor beggar. But he did carry on so, and I've got my own trouble. 'I couldn't stand 'im monopolisin' misfortune the way he does. When the inquest's over, I'm off. If I can't get some sun soon, I'll be as dead as 'im."

Michael was relieved. Boddick would be left alone.

When at last he got back to the house with Swain, Fleur was asleep. He did not wake her to tell her the news, but lay a long time trying to get warm, and thinking of that great obstacle to all salvation—the human element. And, mingled with his visions of the woman beside that still, cold body were longings for the warmth of the young body close to him.

The photographs were providential. For three days no paper could be taken up which did not contain some allusion, illustrated, to "The Tragedy on a Buckinghamshire Estate"; "German actor hangs himself"; "The drama at Lippinghall"; "Tragic end of an experiment"; "Right to Left: Mr. Michael Mont, Member for Mid-Bucks; Bergfeld, the German actor who hanged himself; Mrs. Bergfeld."

'The Evening Sun' wrote more in sorrow than in anger: "The suicide of a German actor on Sir Lawrence Mont's estate at Lippinghall has in it a touch of the grotesquely moral. The unfortunate man seems to have been one of three 'out-of-works' selected by the young Member for Mid-Bucks, recently conspicuous for his speech on 'Foggartism,' for a practical experiment in that peculiar movement. Why he should have chosen a German to assist the English people to return to the Land is not perhaps very clear; but, largely speaking, the incident illustrates the utter unsuitability of all amateur attempts to solve this problem, and the futility of pretending to deal with the unemployment crisis while we still tolerate among us numbers of aliens who take the bread out of the mouths of our own people." The same issue contained a short leader entitled: "The Alien in our Midst." The inquest was well attended. It was common knowledge that three men and one woman lived in the hut, and sensational developments were expected. A good deal of disappointment was felt that the evidence disclosed nothing at all of a sexual character.

Fleur, with the eleventh baronet, returned to town after it was over. Michael remained for the funeral—in a Catholic cemetery some miles away. He walked with Henry Boddick behind Mrs. Bergfeld. A little sleet was drifting out of a sky the colour of the gravestones, and

against that whitish sky the yew-trees looked very stark. He had ordered a big wreath laid on the grave, and when he saw it thus offered up, he thought: 'First human beings, then rams, now flowers! Progress! I wonder!'

Having arranged that Norah Curfew should take Mrs. Bergfeld as cook in Bethnal Green, he drove her up to London in the Manor car. During that long drive he experienced again feelings that he had not had since the war. Human hearts, dressed-up to the nines in circumstance, interests, manners, accents, race, and class, when stripped by grief, by love, by hate, by laughter were one and the same heart. But how seldom were they stripped! Life was a clothed affair! A good thing too, perhaps—the strain of nakedness was too considerable! He was, in fact, infinitely relieved to see the face of Norah Curfew, and hear her cheerful words to Mrs. Bergfeld:

"Come in, my dear, and have some tea!" She was the sort who stripped to the heart without strain or shame.

Fleur was in the drawing-room when he got home, furred up to her cheeks, which were bright as if she had just come in from the cold.

"Been out, my child?"

"Yes. I—" She stopped, looked at him rather queerly, and said: "Well, have you finished with that business?"

"Yes; thank God. I've dropped the poor creature on Norah Curfew."

Fleur smiled. "Ah! Yes, Norah Curfew! *She* lives for everybody but herself, doesn't she?"

"She does," said Michael, rather sharply.

"The new woman. One's getting clean out of fashion."

Michael took her cheeks between his hands.

"What's the matter, Fleur?"

"Nothing."

"There is."

"Well, one gets a bit fed up with being left out, as if one were fit for nothing but Kit, and looking appetising."

Michael dropped his hands, hurt and puzzled. Certainly he had not consulted her about his 'down and outs'; had felt sure it would only bore or make her laugh—No future in it! And had there been?

"Any time you like to go shares in any mortal thing, Fleur, you've only to say so."

"Oh! I don't want to poke into your affairs. I've got my own. Have you had tea?"

"Do tell me what's the matter?"

"My dear boy, you've already asked me that, and I've already told you—nothing."

"Won't you kiss me?"

"Of course. And there's Kit's bath—would you like to go up?"

Each short stab went in a little farther. This was a spiritual crisis, and he did not know in the least how to handle it. Didn't she want him to admire her, to desire her? What did she want? Recognition that she was as interested as he in—the state of the Country? Of course! Only—was she?

"Well," she said, "I want tea, anyway. Is the new woman dramatic?"

Jealousy? The notion was absurd. He said quietly:

"I don't quite follow you."

Fleur looked up at him with very clear eyes.

"Good God!" said Michael, and left the room.

He went up-stairs and sat down before 'The White Monkey.' In that strategic position he better perceived the core of his domestic moment. Fleur had to be first—had to take precedence. No object in her collection must live a life of its own! He was appalled by the bitterness of that thought. No, no! It was only that she had a com-

plex—a silver spoon, and it had become natural in her mouth. She resented his having interests in which she was not first; or rather, perhaps, resented the fact that they were not her interests too. And that was to her credit, when you came to think of it. She was vexed with herself for being egocentric. Poor child! ‘I’ve got to mind my eye,’ thought Michael, ‘or I shall make some modern-novel mess of this in three parts.’ And his mind strayed naturally to the science of dishing up symptoms as if they were roots—ha! He remembered his nursery governess locking him in; he had dreaded being penned up ever since. The psychoanalysts would say that was due to the action of his governess. It wasn’t—many small boys wouldn’t have cared a hang; it was due to a nature that existed before that action. He took up the photograph of Fleur that stood on his desk. He loved the face, he would always love it. If she had limitations—well! So had he—lots! This was comedy, one mustn’t make it into tragedy! Surely she had a sense of humour, too! Had she? Had she not? And Michael searched the face he held in his hands. . . .

But, as is usual with husbands, he had diagnosed without knowledge of all the facts.

Fleur had been bored at Lippinghall, even collection of the Minister had tried her. She had concealed her boredom from Michael. But self-sacrifice takes its revenge. She reached home in a mood of definite antagonism to public affairs. Hoping to feel better if she bought a hat or two, she set out for Bond Street. At the corner of Burlington Street, a young man bared his head.

“Fleur!”

Wilfrid Desert! Very lean and very brown!

“You!”

“Yes. I’m just back. How’s Michael?”

"Very well. Only he's in Parliament."

"Great Scott! And how are you?"

"As you see. Did you have a good time?"

"Yes. I'm only perching. The East has got me!"

"Are you coming to see us?"

"I think not. The burnt child, you know."

"Yes; you *are* brown!"

"Well, good-bye, Fleur! You look just the same, only more so. I'll see Michael somewhere."

"Good-bye!" She walked on without looking back, and then regretted not having found out whether Wilfrid had done the same.

She had given Wilfrid up for—well, for Michael, who—who had forgotten it! Really she was too self-sacrificing!

And then at three o'clock a note was brought her:

"By hand, ma'am; answer waiting."

She opened an envelope, stamped 'Cosmopolis Hotel.'

"MADAM,

"We apologise for troubling you, but are in some perplexity. Mr. Francis Wilmot, a young American gentleman, who had been staying in this hotel since early October, has, we are sorry to say, contracted pneumonia. The doctor reports unfavourably on his condition. In these circumstances we thought it right to examine his effects, in order that we might communicate with his friends; but the only indication we can find is a card of yours. I venture to ask you if you can help us in the matter.

"Believe me to be, Madam,

"Your faithful servant,

"(for the Management)."

Fleur stared at an illegible signature, and her thoughts were bitter. Jon had dumped Francis on her as a herald

of his happiness ; her enemy had lifted him ! Well, then, why didn't that Cat look after him herself ? Oh ! well, poor boy ! Ill in a great hotel—without a soul !

“ Call me a taxi, Coaker.”

On her way to the Hotel she felt slight excitement of the ‘ ministering angel ’ order.

Giving her name at the bureau, she was taken up to Room 209. A chambermaid was there. The doctor, she said, had ordered a nurse, who had not yet come.

Francis Wilmot, very flushed, was lying back, propped up ; his eyes were closed.

“ How long has he been ill like this ? ”

“ I've noticed him looking queer, ma'am ; but we didn't know how bad he was until to-day. I think he's just neglected it. The doctor says he's got to be packed. Poor gentleman, it's very sad. You see, he's hardly there ! ”

Francis Wilmot's lips were moving ; he was evidently on the verge of delirium.

“ Go and make some lemon tea in a jug as weak and hot as you can ; quick ! ”

When the maid had gone, she went up and put her cool hand to his forehead.

“ It's all right, Francis. Much pain ? ”

Francis Wilmot's lips ceased to move ; he looked up at her and his eyes seemed to burn.

“ If you cure me,” he said, “ I'll hate you. I just want to get out, quick ! ”

She changed her hand on his forehead, whose heat seemed to scorch the skin of her palm. His lips resumed their almost soundless movement. The meaningless, meaningful whispering frightened her, but she stood her ground, constantly changing her hand, till the maid came back with the tea.

"The nurse has come, miss ; she'll be up in a minute."

"Pour out the tea. Now, Francis, drink !"

His lips sucked, chattered, sucked. Fleur handed back the cup, and stood away. His eyes had closed again.

"Oh ! ma'am," whispered the maid, "he *is* bad ! Such a nice young gentleman, too."

"What was his temperature ; do you know ?"

"I did hear the doctor say nearly 105. Here is the nurse, ma'am."

Fleur went to her in the doorway.

"It's not just ordinary, nurse—he *wants* to go. I think a love-affair's gone wrong. Shall I stop and help you pack him ?"

When the pneumonia jacket had been put on, she lingered, looking down at him. His eyelashes lay close and dark against his cheeks, long and innocent, like a little boy's.

Outside the door, the maid touched her arm.

"I found this letter, ma'am ; ought I to show it to the doctor ?"

Fleur read :

"MY POOR DEAR BOY,

"We were crazy yesterday. It isn't any good, you know. Well, I haven't got a breakable heart ; nor have you really, though you may think so when you get this. Just go back to your sunshine and your darkies, and put me out of your thoughts. I couldn't stay the course. I couldn't possibly stand being poor. I must just go through it with my Scotsman and travel the appointed road. What is the good of thinking we can play at children in the wood, when one of them is

"Your miserable (at the moment)

"MARJORIE.

"I mean this—I mean it. Don't come and see me any more, and make it worse for yourself. M."

"Exactly!" said Fleur. "I've told the nurse. Keep it and give it him back if he gets well. If he doesn't, burn it. I shall come to-morrow." And, looking at the maid with a faint smile, she added: "*I am not that lady!*"

"Oh! no, ma'am—miss—no, I'm sure! Poor young gentleman! Isn't there nothing to be done?"

"I don't know. I should think not. . . ."

She had kept all these facts from Michael with a sudden retaliatory feeling. He couldn't have private—or was it public—life all to himself!

After he had gone out with his 'Good God!' she went to the window. Queer to have seen Wilfrid again! Her heart had not fluttered, but it tantalised her not to know whether she could attract him back. Out in the square it was as dark as when last she had seen him before he fled to the East—a face pressed to this window that she was touching with her fingers. 'The burnt child!' No! She did not want to reduce him to that state again; to copy Marjorie Ferrar, who had copied her. If, instead of going East, Wilfrid had chosen to have pneumonia like poor Francis! What would she have done? Let him die for want of her? And what ought she do about Francis, having seen that letter? Tell Michael? No, he thought her frivolous and irresponsible. Well! She would show him! And that sister—who had married Jon? Ought she to be cabled to? But this would have a rapid crisis, the nurse had said, and to get over from America in time would be impossible! Fleur went back to the fire. What kind of girl was this wife of Jon's? Another in the new fashion—like Norah Curfew; or just one of those Americans out for her own way and the best of every-

thing? But they would have the new fashion in America, too—even though it didn't come from Paris. Anne Forsyte!—Fleur gave a little shiver in front of the hot fire.

She went up-stairs, took off her hat, and scrutinised her image. Her face was coloured and rounded, her eyes were clear, her brow unlined, her hair rather flattened. She fluffed it out, and went across into the nursery.

The eleventh baronet, asleep, was living his private life with a very determined expression on his face; at the foot of his cot lay the Dandie, with his chin pressed to the floor, and at the table the nurse was sewing. In front of her lay an illustrated paper with the photograph inscribed: "Mrs. Michael Mont, with Kit and Dandie."

"What do you think of it, nurse?"

"I think it's horrible, ma'am; it makes Kit look as if he hadn't any sense—giving him a stare like that!"

Fleur took up the paper; her quick eyes had seen that it concealed another. There on the table was a second effigy of herself: "Mrs. Michael Mont, the pretty young London hostess, who, rumour says, will shortly be defendant in a Society lawsuit." And, above, yet another effigy, inscribed: "Miss Marjorie Ferrar, the brilliant granddaughter of the Marquis of Shropshire, whose engagement to Sir Alexander MacGown, M.P., is announced."

Fleur dropped paper back on paper.