

CHAPTER III

MICHAEL TAKES 'A LUNAR'

MICHAEL had returned from Italy with the longing to 'get on with it,' which results from Southern holidays. Countryman by upbringing, still deeply absorbed by the unemployment problem and committed to Foggartism, as its remedy, he had taken up no other hobby in the House, and was eating the country's bread, if somewhat unbuttered, and doing nothing for it. He desired, therefore, to know where he stood, and how long he was going to stand there.

Bent on 'taking this lunar'—as 'Old Forsyte' would call it—at his own position, he walked away from the House that same day, after dealing with an accumulated correspondence. He walked towards Pevensey Blythe, in the office of that self-sufficing weekly: 'The Outpost.' Sunburnt from his Italian holiday and thinned by Italian cookery, he moved briskly, and thought of many things. Passing down on to the Embankment, where a number of unemployed birds on a number of trees were also wondering, it seemed, where they stood and how long they were going to stand there, he took a letter from his pocket to read a second time.

"HONOURABLE SIR,

"12 Sapper's Row,

"Camden Town.

"Being young in 'Who's Who,' you will not be hard, I think, to those in suffering. I am an Austrian woman who married a German eleven years ago. He was an

actor on the English stage, for his father and mother, who are no more living, brought him to England quite young. Interned he was, and his health broken up. He has the neurasthenic very bad so he cannot be trusted for any work. Before the war he was always in a part, and we had some good money; but this went partly when I was left with my child alone, and the rest was taken by the P. T., and we got very little back, neither of us being English. What we did get has all been to the doctor, and for our debts, and for burying our little child, which died happily, for though I loved it much this life which we have is not fit for a child to live. We live on my needle, and that is not earning much, a pound a week and sometimes nothing. The managers will not look at my husband all these years, because he shakes suddenly, so they think he drinks, but, Sir, he has not the money to buy it. We do not know where to turn, or what to do. So I thought, dear Sir, whether you could do anything for us with the P. T.; they have been quite sympathetic; but they say they administrate an order and cannot do more. Or if you could get my husband some work where he will be in open air—the doctor say that is what he want. We have nowhere to go in Germany or in Austria, our well-loved families being no more alive. I think we are like many, but I cannot help asking you, Sir, because we want to keep living if we can, and now we are hardly having any food. Please to forgive me my writing, and to believe your very anxious and humble

“ANNA BERGFELD.”

‘God help them!’ thought Michael, under a plane-tree close to Cleopatra’s Needle, but without conviction. For in his view God was not so much interested in the fate of individual aliens as the Governor of the Bank of Eng-

land in the fate of a pound of sugar bought with the fraction of a Bradbury; He would not arbitrarily interfere with a ripple of the tides set loose by His arrangement of the Spheres. God, to Michael, was a monarch strictly limited by His own Constitution. He restored the letter to his pocket. Poor creatures! But really, with 1,200,000 and more English unemployed, mostly due to that confounded Kaiser and his Navy stunt—! If that fellow and his gang had not started their Naval rivalry in 1899, England would have been out of the whole mess, or, perhaps, there never would have been a mess!

He turned up from the Temple station towards the offices of 'The Outpost.' He had 'taken' that weekly for some years now. It knew everything, and managed to convey a slight impression that nobody else knew anything; so that it seemed more weighty than any other weekly. Having no particular Party to patronise, it could patronise the lot. Without Imperial bias, it professed a special knowledge of the Empire. Not literary, it made a point of reducing the heads of literary men—Michael, in his publishing days, had enjoyed every opportunity of noticing that. Professing respect for Church and the Law, it was an adept at giving them 'what-for.' It fancied itself on Drama, striking a somewhat Irish attitude towards it. But, perhaps above all, it excelled in neat detraction from political reputations, keeping them in their place, and that place a little lower than 'The Outpost's.' Moreover, from its editorials emanated that 'holy ghost' of inspired knowledge in periods just a little beyond average comprehension, without which no such periodical had real importance.

Michael went up the stairs two at a time, and entered a large square room, where Mr. Blythe, back to the door, was pointing with a ruler to a circle drawn on a map.

"This is a bee map," said Mr. Blythe to himself. "Quite the bee-est map I ever saw."

Michael could not contain a gurgle, and the eyes of Mr. Blythe came round, prominent, epileptic, richly encircled by pouches.

"Hallo!" he said defiantly: "You? The Colonial Office preparæd this map specially to show the best spots for Settlement schemes. And they've left out Baggersfontein—the very hub."

Michael seated himself on the table.

"I've come in to ask what you think of the situation? My wife says Labour will be out in no time."

"Our charming little lady!" said Mr. Blythe; "Labour will survive Ireland; they will survive Russia; they will linger on in their precarious way. One hesitates to predict their decease. Fear of their Budget may bring them down in February. After the smell of Russian fat has died away—say in November, Mont—one may make a start."

"This first speech," said Michael, "is a nightmare to me. How, exactly, am I to start Foggartism?"

"One will have achieved the impression of a body of opinion before then."

"But will there be one?"

"No," said Mr. Blythe.

"Oh!" said Michael. "And, by the way, what about Free Trade?"

"One will profess Free Trade, and put on duties."

"God and Mammon."

"Necessary in England, before any new departure, Mont. Witness Liberal-Unionism, Tory-Socialism, and——"

"Other ramps," said Michael, gently.

"One will glide, deprecate Protection till there is more

Protection than Free Trade, then deprecate Free Trade. Foggartism is an end, not a means; Free Trade and Protection are means, not the ends politicians have made them."

Roused by the word politician, Michael got off the table; he was coming to have a certain sympathy with those poor devils. They were supposed to have no feeling for the country, and to be wise only after the event. But, really, who could tell what was good for the country, among the mists of talk? Not even old Foggart, Michael sometimes thought.

"You know, Blythe," he said, "that we politicians don't think ahead, simply because we know it's no earthly. Every elector thinks his own immediate good is the good of the country. Only their own shoes pinching will change electors' views. If Foggartism means adding to the price of living now, and taking wage-earning children away from workmen's families for the sake of benefit—ten or twenty years hence—who's going to stand for it?"

"My dear young man," said Mr. Blythe, "conversion is our job. At present our trade-unionists despise the outside world. They've never seen it. Their philosophy is bounded by their smoky little streets. But five million pounds spent on the organised travel of a hundred thousand working men would do the trick in five years. It would infect the working class with a feverish desire for a place in the sun. The world is their children's for the taking. But who can blame them, when they know nothing of it?"

"Some thought!" said Michael: "Only—what Government will think it? Can I take those maps? . . . By the way," he said at the door, "there are Societies, you know, for sending out children."

Mr. Blythe grunted. "Yes. Excellent little affairs! A few hundred children doing well—concrete example of

what might be. Multiply it a hundredfold, and you've got a beginning. You can't fill pails with a teaspoon. Good-bye!"

Out on the Embankment Michael wondered if one could love one's country with a passion for getting people to leave it. But this overbloated town condition, with its blight and smoky ugliness; the children without a chance from birth; these swarms of poor devils without work, who dragged about and hadn't an earthly, and never would, on present lines; this unbalanced, hand-to-mouth, dependent state of things—surely that wasn't to be for ever the state of the country one loved! He stared at the towers of Westminster, with the setting sun behind them. And there started up before him the thousand familiars of his past—trees, fields and streams, towers, churches, bridges; the English breeds of beasts, the singing birds, the owls, the jays and rooks at Lippinghall, the little differences from foreign sorts in shrub, flower, lichen, and winged life; the English scents, the English haze, the English grass; the eggs and bacon; the slow good humour, the moderation and the pluck; the smell of rain; the apple-blossom, the heather, and the sea. His country, and his breed—unspoilable at heart! He passed the Clock Tower. The House looked lacy and imposing, more beautiful than fashion granted. Did they spin the web of England's future in that House? Or were they painting camouflage—a screen, over old England?

A familiar voice said: "This is a monstrous great thing!"

And Michael saw his father-in-law staring up at the Lincoln statue. "What did they want to put it here for?" said Soames. "It's not English." He walked along at Michael's side. "Fleur well?"

"Splendid. Italy suited her like everything."

Soames sniffed. "They're a theatrical lot," he said. "Did you see Milan cathedral!"

"Yes, sir. It's about the only thing we didn't take to."

"H'm! Their cooking gave me the collywobblers in '82. I dare say it's better now. How's the boy?"

"A1, sir."

Soames made a sound of gratification, and they turned the corner into South Square.

"What's this?" said Soames.

Outside the front door were two battered-looking trunks, a young man, grasping a bag, and ringing the bell, and a taxicab turning away.

"I can't tell you, sir," murmured Michael. "Unless it's the angel Gabriel."

"He's got the wrong house," said Soames, moving forward.

But just then the young man disappeared within.

Soames walked up to the trunks. "Francis Wilmot," he read out. "'S.S. Amphibian.' There's some mistake!"