

CHAPTER IX

ROUT AT MRS. MAGUSSIE'S

THERE are routs social, political, propagandic; and routs like Mrs. Magussie's. In one of Anglo-American birth, inexhaustible wealth, unimpeachable widowhood, and catholic taste, the word hostess had found its highest expression. People might die, marry, and be born with impunity so long as they met, preferably in her house, one of the largest in Mayfair. If she called in a doctor, it was to meet another doctor; if she went to church, it was to get Canon Forant to meet Dean Kimble at lunch afterwards. Her cards of invitation had the words: "To meet" printed on them; and she never put "me." She was selfless. Once in a way she had a real rout, because once in a way a personality was available, whose name everybody, from poets to prelates, must know. In her intimate belief people loved to meet anybody sufficiently distinguished; and this was where she succeeded, because almost without exception they did. Her two husbands had 'passed on,' having met in their time nearly everybody. They had both been distinguished, and had first met in her house; and she would never have a third for Society was losing its landmarks, and she was too occupied. People were inclined to smile at mention of Bella Magussie, and yet, how do without one who performed the function of cement? Without her, bishops could not place their cheeks by the jowls of ballet-girls, or Home Secretaries be fertilised by disorderly dramatists.

Except in her house, the diggers-up of old civilisations in Beluchistan never encountered the levellers of modern civilisation in London. Nor was there any chance for lights of the Palace to meet those lights of the Halls—Madame Nemesia and Top Nobby. Nowhere else could a Russian dancer go in to supper with Sir Walter Peddel, M.D., F.R.S.T.R., P.M.V.S., R.I.P. Even he who had the finest collection of ducks' eggs in first-class cricket was not without a chance of wringing the hand of the great Indian economist Sir Banerjee Bath Babore. Mrs. Magussie's, in fine, was a house of chief consequence; and her long face, as of the guardian of some first principle, moving above the waters of celebrity, was wrinkled in a great cause. To meet or not to meet? She had answered the question for good and all.

The "met" or "meetee" for her opening rout in 1925 was the great Italian violinist Luigi Sporza, who had just completed his remarkable tour of the world, having in half the time played more often than any two previous musicians. The prodigious feat had been noted in the Press of all countries with every circumstance—the five violins he had tired out, the invitation he had received to preside over a South American Republic, the special steamer he had chartered to keep an engagement in North America, and his fainting fit in Moscow after the Beethoven and Brahms concertos, the Bach chaconne, and seventeen encores. During the lingering year of his great effort, his fame had been established. As an artist he had been known to a few, as an athlete he was now known to all.

Michael and Fleur, passing up the centre stairway, saw a man 'not 'arf like a bull,' as Michael muttered, whose hand people were seizing, one after the other, to move away with a look of pain.

"Only Italy can produce men like that," said Michael in Fleur's ear. "Give him the go-by. He'll hurt you."

But Fleur moved forward.

"Made of sterner stuff," murmured Michael. It was not the part of his beloved to miss the hand of celebrity, however horny! No portion of her charming face quivered as the great athlete's grip closed on hers, and his eyes, like those of a tired minotaur, traversed her supple body with a gleam of interest.

'Hulking brute!' thought Michael, disentangling his own grasp, and drifting with her over shining space. Since yesterday's ordeal and its subsequent spring-running, he had kept his unacceptable misgivings to himself; he did not even know whether, at this rout, she was deliberately putting their position to the test, or merely, without forethought, indulging her liking to be in the swim. And what a swim! In that great pillared *salon*, Members of Parliament, poets, musicians, very dry in the smile, as who should say: 'I could have done it better,' or 'Imagine doing that!' peers, physicians, dancers, painters, Labour Leaders, cricketers, lawyers, critics, ladies of fashion, and ladies who 'couldn't bear it'—every mortal person that Michael knew or didn't know, seemed present. He watched Fleur's eyes quartering them, busy as bees beneath the white lids he had kissed last night. He envied her that social curiosity; to live in London without it was like being at the sea without bathing. She was quietly—he could tell—making up her mind whom she wanted to speak to among those she knew, and whom, among those she didn't yet, she wanted to speak to her. 'I hope to God she's not in for a snubbing,' he thought, and as soon as she was engaged in talk, he slipped towards a pillar. A small voice behind him said: "Well, young Mont!". Mr. Blythe, looking like a Dover sole above

Kew Bridge, was squeezed against the same pillar, his eyes goggling timorously above his beard.

"Stick to me!" he said. "These bees are too bee busy."

"Were you in Court yesterday?" asked Michael.

"No; one read about it. You did well."

"She did better."

"H'm!" said Mr. Blythe. "By the way, 'The Evening Sun' was at us again this afternoon. They compared us to kittens playing with their tails. It's time for your second barrel, Mont."

"I thought—on the agricultural estimates."

"Good! Governmental purchase and control of wheat. Stress use of the present machinery. No more officials than are absolutely necessary."

"Blythe," said Michael suddenly, "where were you born?"

"Lincolnshire."

"You're English, then?"

"Pure," said Mr. Blythe.

"So am I; so's old Foggart—i looked him up in the stud-book. It's lucky, because we shall certainly be assailed for lack of patriotism."

"We are," said Mr. Blythe. "'People who can see no good in their own country. . . . Birds who foul their own nest. . . . Gentry never happy unless running England down in the eyes of the world. . . . Calamity-mongers. . . . Pessimists. . . .' You don't mind that sort of gup, I hope?"

"Unfortunately," said Michael, "I do; it hurts me inside. It's so damned unjust. I simply can't bear the idea of England being in a fix."

Mr. Blythe's eyes rolled.

"She's bee well not going to be, if we can help it."

"If only I amounted to something," murmured Michael; "but I always feel as if I could creep into one of my back teeth."

"Have it crowned. What you want is brass, Mont. And talking of brass: There's your late adversary! *She's* got it all right. Look at her!"

Michael saw Marjorie Ferrar moving away from the great Italian, in not too much of a sea-green gown, with her red-gold head held high. She came to a stand a small room's length from Fleur, and swept her eyes this way and that. Evidently she had taken up that position in deliberate challenge.

"I must go to Fleur."

"So must I," said Mr. Blythe, and Michael gave him a grateful look.

And now it would have been so interesting to one less interested than Michael. The long, the tapering nose of Society could be seen to twitch, move delicately upwards, and like the trunk of some wild elephant scenting man, writhe and snout this way and that, catching the whiff of sensation. Lips were smiling and moving closer to ears; eyes turning from that standing figure to the other; little reflective frowns appeared on foreheads, as if, beneath cropped and scented scalps, brains were trying to make choice. And Marjorie Ferrar stood smiling and composed; and Fleur talked and twisted the flower in her hand; and both went on looking their best. So began a battle without sign of war declared, without even seeming recognition of each other's presence. Mr. Blythe, indeed, stood pat between the two of them. Bulky and tall, he was an effective screen. But Michael, on the other side of her, could see and grimly follow. The Nose was taking time to apprehend the full of the aroma; the Brain to make its choice. Tide seemed at balance, not moving

in or out. And then, with the slow implacability of tides, the water moved away from Fleur and lapped round her rival. Michael chattered, Mr. Blythe goggled, using the impersonal pronoun with a sort of passion; Fleur smiled, talked, twisted the flower. And, over there, Marjorie Ferrar seemed to hold a little Court. Did people admire, commiserate, approve of, or sympathise with her? Or did they disapprove of himself and Fleur? Or was it just that the 'Pet of the Panjoys' was always the more sensational figure? Michael watched Fleur growing paler, her smile more nervous, the twitching of the flower spasmodic. And he dared not suggest going; for she would see in it an admission of defeat. But on the faces, turned their way, the expression became more and more informative. Sir James Foskisson had done his job too well; he had slavered his clients with his own self-righteousness. Better the confessed libertine than those who brought her to judgment! And Michael thought: 'Dashed natural, after all! Why didn't the fellow take my tip, and let us pay and look pleasant.'

And just then close to the great Italian he caught sight of a tall young man with his hair brushed back, who was looking at his fingers. By George! It was Bertie Curfew! And there behind him, waiting for his turn 'to meet,' who but MacGown himself! The humour of the gods had run amok! Head in air, soothing his mangled fingers, Bertie Curfew passed them, and strayed into the group around his former flame. Her greeting of him was elaborately casual. But up went the tapering Nose, for here came MacGown! How the fellow had changed—grim, greyish, bitter? The great Italian had met his match for once. And he too, stepped into that throng.

A queer silence was followed by a burst of speech, and then by dissolution. In twos and threes they trickled off,

and there were MacGown and his betrothed standing alone. Michael turned to Fleur.

"Let's go."

Silence reigned in their homing cab. He had chattered himself out on the field of battle, and must wait for fresh supplies of camouflage. But he slipped his hand along till it found hers, which did not return his pressure. The card he used to play at times of stress—the eleventh baronet—had failed for the last three months; Fleur seemed of late to resent his introduction as a remedy. He followed her into the dining-room, sore at heart, bewildered in mind. He had never seen her look so pretty as in that oyster-coloured frock, very straight and simply made, with a swing out above the ankles. She sat down at the narrow dining-table, and he seated himself opposite, with the costive feeling of one who cannot find words that will ring true. For social discomfiture he himself didn't care a tinker's curse; but she——!

And, suddenly, she said:

"And you don't mind?"

"For myself—not a bit."

"Yes, you've still got your Foggartism and your Bethnal Green."

"If you care, Fleur, I care a lot."

"If I care!"

"How—exactly?"

"I'd rather not increase your feeling that I'm a snob."

"I never had any such feeling."

"Michael!"

"Hadn't you better say what you mean by the word?"

"You know perfectly well."

"I know that you appreciate having people about you, and like them to think well of you. That isn't being a snob."

"Yes; you're very kind, but you don't admire it."

"I admire *you*."

"You mean, desire me. You admire Norah Curfew."

"Norah Curfew! For all I care, she might snuff out to-morrow."

And from her face he had the feeling that she believed him.

"If it isn't her, it's what she stands for—all that I'm not."

"I admire a lot in you," said Michael, fervently; "your intelligence, your *flair*; I admire you with Kit and your father; your pluck; and the way you put up with me."

"No, I admire you much more than you admire me. Only, you see, I'm not capable of devotion."

"What about Kit?"

"I'm devoted to myself—that's all."

He reached across the table and touched her hand.

"Morbid, darling."

"No. I see too clearly to be morbid."

She was leaning back, and her throat, very white and round, gleamed in the alabaster-shaded light; little choky movements were occurring there.

"Michael, I want you to take me round the world."

"And leave Kit?"

"He's too young to mind. Besides, my mother would look after him."

If she had got as far as that, this was a deliberate desire!

"But, your father——"

"He's not really old yet, and he'd have Kit."

"When we rise in August, perhaps——"

"No, now."

"It's only five months to wait. We'd have time in the vacation to do a lot of travelling."

Fleur looked straight at him.

"I knew you cared more for Foggartism now than for me."

"Be reasonable, Fleur."

"For five months—with the feeling I've got here!" she put her hand to her breast. "I've had six months of it already. You don't realise, I suppose, that I'm down and out?"

"But, Fleur, it's all so——"

"Yes, it's always petty to mind being a dead failure, isn't it?"

"But, my child——"

"Oh! If you can't feel it——!"

"I can—I felt wild this evening. But all you've got to do is to let them see that you don't care; and they'll come buzzing round again like flies. It would be running away, Fleur."

"No," said Fleur, coldly, "it's not that—I don't try twice for the same prize. Very well, I'll stay and be laughed at."

Michael got up.

"I know you don't think there's anything to my job. But there is, Fleur, and I've put my hand to it. Oh! don't look like that. Dash it! This is dreadful!"

"I suppose I could go by myself. That would be more thrilling."

"Absurd! Of course you couldn't! You're seeing blue to-night, old thing. It'll all seem different to-morrow."

"To-morrow and to-morrow! No, Michael, mortification has set in, my funeral can take place any day you like!"

Michael's hands went up. She meant what she was saying! To realise, he must remember how much store she had set on her powers as hostess; how she had worked

for her collection and shone among it ! Her house of cards all pulled about her ears ! Cruel ! But would going round the world help her ? Yes ! Her instinct was quite right. He had been round the world himself, nothing else would change her values in quite that way ; nothing else would so guarantee oblivion in others and herself ! Lippinghall, her father's, the sea for the five months till vacation came—they wouldn't meet her case ! She needed what would give her back importance. And yet, how could he go until the vacation ? Foggartism—that lean and lonely plant—unwatered and without its only gardener, would wither to its roots, if, indeed, it had any. There was some movement in it now, interest here and there—this Member and that was pecking at it. Private efforts in the same direction were gathering way. And time was going on—Big Ben had called no truce ; unemployment swelling, trade dawdling, industrial trouble brewing—brewing, hope losing patience ! And what would old Blythe say to his desertion now ?

“Give me a week,” he muttered. “It's not easy. I must think it over.”