

CHAPTER V

SIDE-SLIPS

IF Providence was completely satisfied with Sapper's Row, Camden Town, Michael was not. What could justify those twin dismal rows of three-storied houses, so begrimed that they might have been collars washed in Italy? What possible attention to business could make these little ground-floor shops do anything but lose money? From the thronged and tram-lined thoroughfare so pregnantly scented with fried fish, petrol, and old clothes, who would turn into this small backwater for sweetness or for profit? Even the children, made with heroic constancy on its second and third floors, sought the sweets of life outside its precincts; for in Sapper's Row they could neither be run over nor stare at the outside of Cinemas. Hand-carts, bicycles, light vans which had lost their nerve and taxicabs which had lost their way, provided all the traffic; potted geraniums and spotted cats supplied all the beauty. Sapper's Row drooped and dithered.

Michael entered from its west end, and against his principles. Here was overcrowded England, at its most dismal, and here was he, who advocated a reduction of its population, about to visit some broken-down aliens with the view of keeping them alive. He looked into three of the little shops. Not a soul! Which was worst? Such little shops frequented, or—deserted? He came to No. 12, and looking up, saw a face looking down. It was wax white, movingly listless, above a pair of hands sewing

at a garment. 'That,' he thought, 'is my "obedient humble" and her needle.' He entered the shop below, a hair-dresser's, containing a dirty basin below a dusty mirror, suspicious towels, bottles, and two dingy chairs. In his shirt-sleeves, astride one of them, reading 'The Daily Mail,' sat a shadowy fellow with pale hollow cheeks, twisted moustache, lank hair, and the eyes, at once knowing and tragic, of a philosopher.

"Hair cut, sir?"

Michael shook his head.

"Do Mr. and Mrs. Bergfeld live here?"

"Up-stairs, top floor."

"How do I get up?"

"Through there."

Passing through a curtained aperture, Michael found a stairway, and at its top, stood, hesitating. His conscience was echoing Fleur's comment on Anna Bergfeld's letter: "Yes, I dare say; but what's the good?" when the door was opened, and it seemed to him almost as if a corpse were standing there, with a face as though some one had come knocking on its grave, so eager and so white.

"Mrs. Bergfeld? My name's Mont. You wrote to me."

The woman trembled so, that Michael thought she was going to faint.

"Will you excuse me, sir, that I sit down?" And she dropped on to the end of the bed. The room was spotless, but, besides the bed, held only a small deal washstand, a pot of geranium, a tin trunk with a pair of trousers folded on it, a woman's hat on a peg, and a chair in the window covered with her sewing.

The woman stood up again. She seemed not more than thirty, thin but prettily formed; and her oval face, with-

out colour except in her dark eyes, suggested Rafael rather than Sapper's Row.

"It is like seeing an angel," she said. "Excuse me, sir."

"Queer angel, Mrs. Bergfeld. Your husband not in?"

"No, sir. Fritz has gone to walk."

"Tell me, Mrs. Bergfeld. If I pay your passages to Germany, will you go?"

"We cannot get a passport now; Fritz has been here twenty years, and never back; he has lost his German nationality, sir; they do not want people like us, you know."

Michael stivered up his hair.

"Where are you from yourself?"

"From Salzburg."

"What about going back there?"

"I would like to, but what would we do? In Austria every one is poor now, and I have no relative left. Here at least we have my sewing."

"How much is that a week?"

"Sometimes a pound; sometimes fifteen shillings. It is bread and the rent."

"Don't you get the dole?"

"No, sir. We are not registered."

Michael took out a five-pound note and laid it with his card on the wash-stand. "I've got to think this over, Mrs. Bergfeld. Perhaps your husband will come and see me." He went out quickly, for the ghostly woman had flushed pink.

Repassing through the curtained aperture, he caught the hair-dresser wiping out the basin.

"Find 'em in, sir?"

"The lady."

"Ah! Seen better days, I should say. The 'usband's a

queer customer; 'alf off his nut. Wanted to come in here with me, but I've got to give this job up."

"Oh! How's that?"

"I've got to have fresh air—only got one lung, and that's not very gaudy. I'll have to find something else."

"That's bad, in these days."

The hair-dresser shrugged his bony shoulders. "Ah!" he said. "I've been a hair-dresser from a boy, except for the war. Funny place this, to fetch up in after where I've been. The war knocked me out." He twisted his little thin moustache.

"No pension?" said Michael.

"Not a bob. What I want to keep me alive is something in the open."

Michael took him in from head to foot. Shadowy, narrow-headed, with one lung.

"But do you know anything about country life?"

"Not a blessed thing. Still, I've got to find something, or peg out."

His tragic and knowing eyes searched Michael's face.

"I'm awfully sorry," said Michael. "Good-bye!"

The hair-dresser made a queer jerky little movement.

Emerging from Sapper's Row into the crowded, roaring thoroughfare, Michael thought of a speech in a play he had seen a year or two before. "The condition of the people leaves much to be desired. I shall make a point of taking up the cudgels in the House. I shall move——!" The condition of the people! What a remote thing! The sportive nightmare of a few dreaming nights, the skeleton in a well-locked cupboard, the discomfiting rare howl of a hungry dog! And probably no folk in England less disturbed by it than the gallant six hundred odd who sat with him in 'that House.' For to improve the condition of the people was their job, and that relieved them

of a sense of nightmare. Since Oliver Cromwell some sixteen thousand, perhaps, had sat there before them, to the same end. And was the trick done—not bee likely! Still *they* were really working for it, and other people were only looking on and telling them how to do it!

Thus was he thinking when a voice said:

“Not got a job about you, sir?”

Michael quickened his steps, then stood still. He saw that the man who had spoken, having cast his eyes down again, had missed this sign of weakness; and he went back to him. They were black eyes in a face round and pasty like a mince pie. Decent and shabby, quiet and forlorn, he wore an ex-Service-man’s badge.

“You spoke to me?” said Michael.

“I’m sure I don’t know why, sir; it just hopped out of me.”

“No work?”

“No; and pretty low.”

“Married?”

“Widower, sir; two children.”

“Dole?”

“Yes; and fair sick of it.”

“In the war, I see?”

“Yes, Mespot.”

“What sort of job do you want?”

“Any mortal thing.”

“Give me your name and address.”

“Henry Boddick, 94 Waltham Buildings, Gunnersbury.”

Michael took it down.

“Can’t promise anything,” he said.

“No, sir.”

“Good luck, anyway. Have a cigar?”

“Thank you, and good luck to *you*, sir.”

Michael saluted, and resumed his progress; once out of sight of Henry Boddick, he took a taxi. A little more of this, and he would lose the sweet reasonableness without which one could not sit in 'that House'!

'For Sale or to Let' recorded recurrently in Portland Place, somewhat restored his sense of balance.

That same afternoon he took Francis Wilmot with him to the House, and leaving him at the foot of the Distinguished Strangers' stairway, made his way on to the floor.

He had never been in Ireland, so that the debate had for him little relation to reality. It seemed to illustrate, however, the obstacles in the way of agreement on any mortal subject. Almost every speech emphasized the paramount need for a settlement, but declared the impossibility of 'going back' on this, that, or the other factor which precluded such settlement. Still, for a debate on Ireland it seemed good-tempered; and presently they would all go out and record the votes they had determined on before it all began. He remembered the thrill with which he had listened to the first debates after his election; the impression each speech had given him that somebody must certainly be converted to something; and the reluctance with which he had discovered that nobody ever was. Some force was at work far stronger than any eloquence, however striking or sincere. The clothes were washed elsewhere; in here they were but aired before being put on. Still, until people put thoughts into words, they didn't know what they thought, and sometimes they didn't know afterwards. And for the hundredth time Michael was seized by a weak feeling in his legs. In a few weeks he himself must rise on them. Would the House accord him its 'customary indulgence'; or would it say: 'Young fellow—teaching your grandmother to suck eggs—shut up!'

He looked around him.

His fellow members were sitting in all shapes. Chosen of the people, they confirmed the doctrine that human nature did not change, or so slowly that one could not see the process—he had seen their prototypes in Roman statues, in mediæval pictures. . . . ‘Plain but pleasant,’ he thought, unconsciously reproducing George Forsyte’s description of himself in his palmy days. But did they take themselves seriously, as under Burke, as under Gladstone even ?

The words ‘customary indulgence’ roused him from reverie ; for they meant a maiden speech. Ha ! yes ! The member for Cornmarket. He composed himself to listen. Delivering himself with restraint and clarity, the speaker seemed suggesting that the doctrine ‘Do unto others as you would they should do unto you’ need not be entirely neglected, even in Ireland ; but it was long—too long—Michael watched the House grow restive. ‘Alas ! poor brother !’ he thought, as the speaker somewhat hastily sat down. A very handsome man rose in his place. He congratulated his honourable friend on his able and well-delivered effort, he only regretted that it had nothing to do with the business in hand. Exactly ! Michael slipped out. Recovering his ‘distinguished stranger,’ he walked away with him to South Square.

Francis Wilmot was in a state of some enthusiasm.

“That was fine,” he said. “Who was the gentleman under the curtains ?”

“The Speaker ?”

“No ; I mean the one who didn’t speak.”

“Exactly ; he’s the dignity of the House.”

“They ought to feed him oxygen ; it must be sleepy under there. I liked the delegate who spoke last. He would ‘go’ in America ; he had big ideas.”

"The idealism which keeps you out of the League of Nations, eh?" said Michael with a grin.

Francis Wilmot turned his head rather sharply.

"Well," he said, "we're like any other people when it comes down to bed-rock."

"Quite so," said Michael, "idealism is just a by-product of geography—it's the haze that lies in the middle distance. The farther you are from bed-rock, the less quick you need be to see it. We're twenty sea-miles more idealistic about the European situation than the French are. And you're three thousand sea-miles more idealistic than we are. But when it's a matter of niggers, we're three thousand sea-miles more idealistic than you; isn't that so?"

Francis Wilmot narrowed his dark eyes.

"It is," he said. "The farther North we go in the States, the more idealistic we get about the negro. Anne and I've lived all our life with darkies, and never had trouble; we love them, and they love us; but I wouldn't trust myself not to join in lynching one that laid his hands on her. I've talked that over many times with Jon. He doesn't see it that way; he says a darky should be tried like a white man; but he doesn't know the real South. His mind is still three thousand sea-miles away."

Michael was silent. Something within him always closed up at mention of a name which he still spelt mentally with an h.

Francis Wilmot added ruminatively: "There are a few saints in every country proof against your theory; but the rest of us, I reckon, aren't above human nature."

"Talking of human nature," said Michael, "here's my father-in-law!"