

CHAPTER IX

POULTRY AND CATS

HE who had been stood in the dining-room, under the name of Bugfill, was still upright. Rather older than Michael, with an inclination to side-whisker, darkish hair, and a pale face stamped with that look of schooled quickness common to so many actors but unfamiliar to Michael, he was grasping the edge of the dining-table with one hand, and a wide-brimmed black hat with the other. The expression of his large, dark-circled eyes was such that Michael smiled and said :

"It's all right, Mr. Bergfeld, I'm not a Manager. Do sit down, and smoke."

The visitor silently took the proffered chair and cigarette with an attempt at a fixed smile. Michael sat on the table.

"I gather from Mrs. Bergfeld that you're on the rocks."

"Fast," said the shaking lips.

"Your health, and your name, I suppose ?"

"Yes."

"You want an open-air job, I believe ? I haven't been able to think of anything very gaudy, but an idea did strike me last night in the stilly watches. How about raising poultry—everybody's doing it."

"If I had my savings."

"Yes, Mrs. Bergfeld told me about them. I can inquire, but I'm afraid——"

"It's robbery." The chattered sound let Michael at once into the confidence of the many Managers who had refused to employ him who uttered it.

"I know," he said, soothingly, "robbing Peter to pay Paul. That clause in the Treaty was a bit' of rank barbarism, of course, camouflage it as they like. Still, it's no good to let it prey on your mind, is it?"

But his visitor had risen. "To take from civilian to pay civilian! Then why not take civilian life for civilian life? What is the difference? And England does it—the leading nation to respect the individual. It is abominable."

Michael began to feel that he was overdoing it.

"You forget," he said, "that the war made us all into barbarians, for the time being; we haven't quite got over it yet. And your country dropped the spark into the powder magazine, you know. But what about this poultry stunt?"

Bergfeld seemed to make a violent effort to control himself.

"For my wife's sake," he said, "I will do anything; but unless I get my savings back, how can I start?"

"I can't promise; but perhaps I could start you. That hair-dresser below you wants an open-air job, too. What's his name, by the way?"

"Swain."

"How do you get on with him?"

"He is an opinionated man, but we are good friends enough."

Michael got off the table. "Well, leave it to me to think it out. We shall be able to do something, I hope;" and he held out his hand.

Bergfeld took it silently, and his eyes resumed the expression with which they had first looked at Michael.

"That man," thought Michael, "will be committing sui-

cide some day, if he doesn't look out.' And he showed him to the door. He stood there some minutes gazing after the German actor's vanishing form, with a feeling as if the dusk were formed out of the dark stories of such as he and the hair-dresser and the man who had whispered to him to stand and deliver a job. Well, Bart must lend him that bit of land beyond the coppice at Lippinghall. He would buy a War hut if there were any left and some poultry stock, and start a colony—the Bergfelds, the hair-dresser, and Henry Boddick. They could cut the timber in the coppice, and put up the fowl-houses for themselves. It would be growing food—a practical experiment in Foggartism! Fleur would laugh at him. But was there anything one could do nowadays that somebody couldn't laugh at? He turned back into the house. Fleur was in the hall.

"Francis Wilmot has gone," she said.

"Why?"

"He's off to Paris."

"What was it he overheard last night?"

"Do you suppose I asked?"

"Well, no," said Michael, humbly. "Let's go up and look at Kit, it's about his bath time."

The eleventh baronet, indeed, was already in his bath.

"All right, nurse," said Fleur, "I'll finish him."

"He's been in three minutes, ma'am."

"Lightly boiled," said Michael.

For one aged only fourteen months this naked infant had incredible vigour—from lips to feet he was all sound and motion. He seemed to lend a meaning to life. His vitality was absolute, not relative. His kicks and crows and splashings had the joy of a gnat's dance, or a jack-daw's gambols in the air. They gave thanks not for what he was about to receive, but for what he was receiving.

White as a turtle-dove, with pink toes, darker in eyes and hair than he would be presently, he grabbed at the soap, at his mother, at the bath-towelling—he seemed only to need a tail. Michael watched him, musing. This manikin, born with all that he could possibly wish for within his reach—how were they to bring him up? Were they fit to bring him up, they who had been born—like all their generation in the richer classes—emancipated, to parents properly broken-in to worship the fetich—Liberty? Born to everything they wanted, so that they were at wits' end to invent something they could not get; driven to restive searching by having their own way? The war had deprived one of one's own way, but the war had overdone it, and left one grasping at licence. And for those, like Fleur, born a little late for the war, the tale of it had only lowered what respect they could have for anything. With veneration killed, and self-denial 'off,' with atavism buried, sentiment derided, and the future in the air, hardly a wonder that modernity should be a dance of gnats, taking itself damned seriously! Such were the reflections of Michael, sitting there above the steam, and frowning at his progeny. Without faith was one fit to be a parent? Well, people were looking for faith again. Only they were bound to hatch the egg of it so hard that it would be addled long before it was a chicken. 'Too self-conscious!' he thought. 'That's our trouble!'

Fleur had finished drying the eleventh baronet, and was dabbing powder over him; her eyes seemed penetrating his skin, as if to gauge the state of health behind it. He watched her take the feet and hands one by one and examine each nail, lost in her scrutiny, unselfconscious in her momentary devotion! And oppressed by the difficulty, as a Member of Parliament, of being devoted, Michael snapped his fingers at the baby and left the nursery. He

went to his study and took down a volume of the Encyclopædia Britannica containing the word Poultry. He read about Leghorns, Orpingtons, White Sussex, Bramaputras, and was little the wiser. He remembered that if you drew a chalk-line to the beak of a hen, the hen thought it was tied up. He wished somebody would draw a chalk-line to his beak. Was Foggartism a chalk-line? A voice said:

"Tell Fleur I'm going to her aunt's."

"Leaving us, sir?"

"Yes, I'm not wanted."

What had happened?

"You'll see her before you go, sir?"

"No," said Soames.

Had somebody rubbed out the chalk-line to Old For-syte's nose?

"Is there any money in poultry-farming, sir?"

"There's no money in anything nowadays."

"And yet the Income Tax returns continue to rise."

"Yes," said Soames; "there's something wrong there."

"You don't think people make their incomes out more than they are?"

Soames blinked. Pessimistic though he felt at the moment, he could not take quite that low view of human nature.

"You'd better see that Fleur doesn't go about abusing that red-haired baggage," he said. "She was born with a silver spoon in her mouth; she thinks she can do what she likes." And he shut Michael in again.

Silver spoon in her mouth! How *à propos!* . . .

After putting her baby into its cot Fleur had gone to the marqueterie bureau in the little sanctuary that would have been called a boudoir in old days. She sat there brooding. How could her father have made it all glar-

ingly public? Couldn't he have seen that it was nothing so long as it was not public, but everything the moment it was? She longed to pour out her heart, and tell people her opinion of Marjorie Ferrar.

She wrote three letters—one to Lady Alison, and two to women in the group who had overheard it all last night. She concluded her third letter with the words: "A woman like that, who pretends to be a friend and sneaks into one's house to sting one behind one's back, is a snake of the first water. How Society can stick her, I can't think; she hasn't a moral about her nor a decent impulse. As for her charm—Good Lord!" Yes! And there was Francis Wilmot! She had not said all she wanted to say to him.

"MY DEAR FRANCIS," she wrote:

"I am so sorry you have to run away like this. I wanted to thank you for standing up for me last night. Marjorie Ferrar is just about the limit. But in London society one doesn't pay attention to backbiting. It has been so jolly to know you. Don't forget us; and do come and see me again when you come back from Paris.

"Your very good friend,

"FLEUR MONT."

In future she would have nothing but men at her evenings! But would they come if there were no women? And men like Philip Quinsey were just as snakelike. Besides, it would look as if she were really hurt. No! She would have to go on as before, just dropping people who were 'catty.' But who wasn't? Except Alison, and heavyweights like Mr. Blythe, the minor Ambassadors, and three or four earnest politicians, she couldn't be sure about any of them. It was the thing to be 'catty.' They all scratched other people's backs, and their faces too

when they weren't looking. Who in Society was exempt from scratches, and who didn't scratch? Not to scratch a little was so dreadfully dull. She could not imagine a scratchless life except perhaps in Italy. Those Fra Angelico frescoes in the San Marco monastery! There was a man who did not scratch. St. Francis talking to his birds, among his little flowers, with the sun and the moon and the stars for near relations. Ste. Claire! Ste. Fleur—little sister of St. Francis! To be unworldly and quite good! To be one who lived to make other people happy! How new! How exciting, even—for about a week; and how dull afterwards! She drew aside the curtains and looked out into the Square. Two cats were standing in the light of a lamp—narrow, marvellously graceful, with their heads turned towards each other. Suddenly they began uttering horrible noises, and became all claws. Fleur dropped the curtain.