

# THE SILVER SPOON

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### A STRANGER

THE young man, who, at the end of September, 1924, dismounted from a taxicab in South Square, Westminster, was so unobtrusively American that his driver had some hesitation in asking for double his fare. The young man had no hesitation in refusing it.

"Are you unable to read?" he said, softly. "Here's four shillings."

With that he turned his back and looked at the house before which he had descended. This the first private English house he had ever proposed to enter inspired him with a certain uneasiness, as of a man who expects to part with a family ghost. Comparing a letter with the number chased in pale brass on the door, he murmured: "It surely is," and rang the bell.

While waiting for the door to be opened, he was conscious of extreme quietude, broken by a clock chiming four as if with the voice of Time itself. When the last boom died, the door yawned inwards, and a man, almost hairless, said:

"Yes, sir?"

The young man removed a soft hat from a dark head.

"This is Mrs. Michael Mont's house?"

"Correct, sir."

"Will you give her my card, and this letter?"

"'Mr. Francis Wilmot, Naseby, S.C.' Will you wait in here, sir?"

Ushered through the doorway of a room on the right, Francis Wilmot was conscious of a commotion close to the ground, and some teeth grazing the calf of his leg.

"Dandie!" said the voice of the hairless man, "you little devil! That dog is a proper little brute with strangers, sir. Stand still! I've known him bite clean through a lady's stockings."

Francis Wilmot saw with interest a silver-grey dog nine inches high and nearly as broad, looking up at him with lustrous eyes above teeth of extreme beauty.

"It's the baby, sir," said the hairless man, pointing to a sort of nest on the floor before the fireless hearth; "he will go for people when he's with the baby. But once he gets to smelling your trousers, he's all right. Better not touch the baby, though. Mrs. Mont was here a minute ago; I'll take your card up to her."

Francis Wilmot sat down on a settee in the middle of the room; and the dog lay between him and the baby.

And while the young man sat he gazed around him. The room was painted in panels of a sub-golden hue, with a silver-coloured ceiling. A clavichord, little golden ghost of a piano, stood at one end. Glass lustres, pictures of flowers and of a silvery-necked lady swinging a skirt and her golden slippers, adorned the walls. The curtains were of gold and silver. The silver-coloured carpet felt wonderfully soft beneath his feet, the furniture was of a golden wood.

The young man felt suddenly quite homesick. . He was back in the living-room of an old 'Colonial' house, in the bend of a lonely South Carolina river, reddish in hue. He was staring at the effigy of his high-collared, red-

coated great-grandfather, Francis Wilmot, Royalist major in the War of Independence. They always said it was like the effigy he saw when shaving every morning; the smooth dark hair drooping across his right temple, the narrow nose and lips, the narrow dark hand on the sword-hilt or the razor, the slits of dark eyes gazing steadily out. Young Francis was seeing the darkies working in the cotton-fields under a sun that he did not seem to have seen since he came over here; he was walking with his setter along the swamp edge, where Florida moss festooned the tall dolorous trees; he was thinking of the Wilmot inheritance, ruined in the Civil War, still decayed yet precious, and whether to struggle on with it, or to sell it to the Yank who wanted a week-end run-to from his Charleston dock job, and would improve it out of recognition. It would be lonely there, now that Anne had married that young Britisher, Jon Forsyte, and gone away north, to Southern Pines. And he thought of his sister, thus lost to him, dark, pale, vivid, 'full of sand.' Yes! this room made him homesick, with its perfection, such as he had never beheld, where the only object out of keeping was that dog, lying on its side now, and so thick through that all its little legs were in the air. Softly he said:

"It's the prettiest room I ever was in."

"What a perfectly charming thing to overhear!"

A young woman, with crinkly chestnut hair above a creamy face, with smiling lips, a short straight nose, and very white dark-lashed eyelids active over dark hazel eyes, stood near the door. She came towards him, and held out her hand.

Francis Wilmot bowed over it, and said, gravely:

"Mrs. Michael Mont?"

"So Jon's married your sister. Is she pretty?"

"She is."

"Very?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I hope baby has been entertaining you."

"He's just great."

"He is, rather. I hear Dandie bit you?"

"I reckon he didn't break the cuticle."

"Haven't you looked? But he's quite healthy. Sit down, and tell me all about your sister and Jon. Is it a marriage of true minds?"

Francis Wilmot sat down.

"It certainly is. Young Jon is a pretty white man, and Anne——"

He heard a sigh.

"I'm very glad. He says in his letter that he's awfully happy. You must come and stay here. You can be as free as you like. Look on us as an hotel."

The young man's dark eyes smiled.

"That's too good of you! I've never been on this side before. They got through the war too soon."

Fleur took the baby out of its nest.

"*This* creature doesn't bite. Look—two teeth, but they don't antagonise—isn't that how you put it?"

"What is its name?"

"Kit—for Christopher. We agreed about its name, luckily. Michael—my husband—will be in directly. He's in Parliament, you know. They're not sitting till Monday—Ireland, of course. We only came back for it from Italy yesterday. Italy's so wonderful—you must see it."

"Pardon me, but is that the Parliament clock that chimes so loud?"

"Big Ben—yes. He marks time for them. Michael says Parliament is the best drag on Progress ever invented. With our first Labour Government, it's been specially in-

teresting this year. Don't you think it's rather touching the way this dog watches my baby? He's got the most terrific jaw!"

"What kind of dog is he?"

"A Dandie Dinmont. We did have a Peke. It was a terrible tragedy. He *would* go after cats; and one day he struck a fighting Tom, and got clawed over both eyes—quite blinded—and so——"

The young man saw her eyes suddenly too bright. He made a soft noise, and said gently: "That was too bad."

"I had to change this room completely. It used to be Chinese. It reminded me too much."

"This little fellow would chaw any cat."

"Luckily he was brought up with kittens. We got him for his legs—they've so bowed in front that he can hardly run, so he just suits the pram. Dan, show your legs!"

The Dandie looked up with a negative sound.

"He's a terrible little 'character.' Do tell me, what's Jon like now? Is he still English?"

The young man was conscious that she had uttered at last something really in her mind.

"He is; but he's a dandy fellow."

"And his mother? She used to be beautiful."

"And is to this day."

"She would be. Grey, I suppose, by now?"

"Yes. You don't like her?"

"Well, I hope she won't be jealous of your sister!"

"I think, perhaps, you're unjust"

"I think, perhaps, I am."

She sat very still, her face hard above the baby's. And the young man, aware of thoughts beyond his reach, got up.

"When you write to Jon," she said, suddenly, "tell him that I'm awfully glad, and that I wish him

luck. I shan't write to him myself. May I call you Francis ? ”

Francis Wilmot bowed. “ I shall be proud, ma'am.”

“ Yes ; but you must call me Fleur. We're sort of related, you know.”

The young man smiled, and touched the name with his lips.

“ Fleur ! It's a beautiful name ! ”

“ Your room will be ready when you come back. You'll have a bathroom to yourself, of course.”

He put his lips to the hand held out.

“ It's wonderful,” he said. “ I was feeling kind of homesick ; I miss the sun over here.”

In going out, he looked back. Fleur had put her baby back in its nest, and was staring straight before her.