

## CHAPTER XIII

### INCEPTION OF THE CASE

THERE are people in every human hive born to focus talk; perhaps their magnetism draws the human tongue, or their lives are lived at an acute angle. Of such was Marjorie Ferrar—one of the most talked-of young women in London. Whatever happened to her was rumoured at once in that collection of the busy and the idle called Society. That she had been ejected from a drawing-room was swiftly known. Fleur's letters about her became current gossip. The reasons for ejection varied from truth to a legend that she had lifted Michael from the arms of his wife.

The origins of lawsuits are seldom simple. And when Soames called it all 'a storm in a teacup,' he might have been right if Lord Charles Ferrar had not been so heavily in debt that he had withdrawn his daughter's allowance; if, too, a Member for a Scottish borough, Sir Alexander MacGown, had not for some time past been pursuing her with the idea of marriage. Wealth made out of jute, a rising Parliamentary repute, powerful physique, and a determined character, had not advanced Sir Alexander's claims in twelve months so much as the withdrawal of her allowance advanced them in a single night. Marjorie Ferrar was, indeed, of those who can always get money at a pinch, but even to such come moments when they have seriously to consider what kind of pinch. In proportion to her age and sex, she was 'dipped' as badly as

her father, and "the withdrawal of her allowance was in the nature of a last straw. In a moment of discouragement she consented to an engagement, not yet to be made public. When the incident at Fleur's came to Sir Alexander's ears, he went to his betrothed flaming. What could he do ?

"Nothing, of course; don't be silly, Alec! Who cares?"

"The thing's monstrous. Let me go and exact an apology from this old blackguard."

"Father's been, and he wouldn't give it. He's got a chin you could hang a kettle on."

"Now, look here, Marjorie, you've got to make our engagement public, and let me get to work on him. I won't have this story going about."

Marjorie Ferrar shook her head.

"Oh! no, my dear. You're still on probation. I don't care a tuppenny ice about the story."

"Well, I do, and I'm going to that fellow to-morrow."

Marjorie Ferrar studied his face—its brown, burning eyes, its black, stiff hair, its jaw—shivered slightly, and had a brain-wave.

"You will do nothing of the kind, Alec, or you'll spill your ink. My father wants me to bring an action. He says I shall get swinging damages."

The Scotsman in MacGown applauded, the lover quailed.

"That may be very unpleasant for you," he muttered, "unless the brute settles out of Court."

"Of course he'll settle. I've got all his evidence in my vanity-bag."

MacGown gripped her by the shoulders and gave her a fierce kiss.

"If he doesn't, I'll break every bone in his body."

"My dear! He's nearly seventy, I should think."

"H'm! Isn't there a young man in' the same boat with him?"

"Michael? Oh! Michael's a dear. I couldn't have his bones broken."

"Indeed!" said MacGown. "Wait till he launches this precious Foggartism they talk of—dreary rot! I'll eat him!"

"Poor little Michael!"

"I heard something about an American boy, too."

"Oh!" said Marjorie Ferrar, releasing herself from his grip. "A bird of passage—don't bother about him."

"Have you got a lawyer?"

"Not yet."

"I send you mine. He'll make them sit up!"

She remained pensive after he had left her, distrusting her own brain-wave. If only she weren't so hard up! She had learned during this month of secret engagement that "Nothing for nothing and only fair value for sixpence" ruled North of the Tweed as well as South. He had taken a good many kisses and given her one trinket which she dared not take to 'her Uncle's.' It began to look as if she would have to marry him. The prospect was in some ways not repulsive—he was emphatically a man; her father would take care that she only married him on terms as liberal as his politics; and perhaps her motto 'Live dangerously' could be even better carried out with him than without. Resting inert in a long chair, she thought of Francis Wilmot. Hopeless as husband, he might be charming as lover, naive, fresh, unknown in London, absurdly devoted, oddly attractive, with his lithe form, dark eyes, engaging smile. Too old-fashioned for words, he had made it clear already that he wanted to marry her. He was a baby. But until she was beyond his reach, she had begun to feel that he was be-

yond hers. After? Well, who knew? She lived in advance, dangerously, with Francis Wilmot. In the meantime this action for slander was a bore! And shaking the idea out of her head, she ordered her horse, changed her clothes, and repaired to the Row. After that she again changed her clothes, went to the Cosmopolis Hotel, and danced with her mask-faced partner, and Francis Wilmot. After that she changed her clothes once more, went to a first night, partook of supper afterwards with the principal actor and his party, and was in bed by two o'clock.

Like most reputations, that of Marjorie Ferrar received more than its deserts. If you avow a creed of indulgence, you will be indulged by the credulous. In truth she had only had two love-affairs passing the limits of decorum; had smoked opium once, and been sick over it; and had sniffed cocaine just to see what it was like. She gambled only with discretion, and chiefly on race-horses; drank with strict moderation and a good head; smoked of course, but the purest cigarettes she could get, and through a holder. If she had learned suggestive forms of dancing, she danced them but once in a blue moon. She rarely rode at a five-barred gate, and that only on horses whose powers she knew. To be in the know she read, of course, anything 'extreme,' but would not go out of her way to do so. She had flown, but just to Paris. She drove a car well, and of course fast, but never to the danger of herself, and seldom to the real danger of the public. She had splendid health, and took care of it in private. She could always sleep at ten minutes' notice, and when she sat up half the night, slept half the day. She was 'in' with the advanced theatre, but took it as it came. Her book of poems, which had received praise because they emanated from one of a class supposed to be unpoetic, was remarkable not so much for irregularity of thought as for irregu-

larity of metre. She was, in sum, credited with a too strict observance of her expressed creed: 'Take life in both hands, and eat it.'

This was why Sir Alexander MacGown's lawyer sat on the edge of his chair in her studio the following morning, and gazed at her intently. He knew her renown better than Sir Alexander. Messrs. Settlewhite and Stark liked to be on the right side of a matter before they took it up. How far would this young lady, with her very attractive appearance and her fast reputation, stand fire? For costs—they had Sir Alexander's guarantee and the word 'traitress' was a good enough beginning; but in cases of word against word, it was ill predicting.

Her physiognomy impressed Mr. Settlewhite favourably. She would not 'get rattled' in Court, if he was any judge; nor had she the Aubrey Beardsley cast of feature he had been afraid of, that might alienate a Jury. No! an upstanding young woman with a good blue eye and popular hair. She would do, if her story were all right.

Marjorie Ferrar, in turn, scrutinised one who looked as if he might take things out of her hands. Long-faced, with grey deep eyes under long dark lashes, all his hair, and good clothes, he was as well preserved a man of sixty as she had ever seen.

"What do you want me to tell you, Mr. Settlewhite?"

"The truth."

"Oh! but naturally. Well, I was just saying to Mr. Quinsey that Mrs. Mont was very eager to form a 'salon,' and had none of the right qualities, and the old person who overheard me thought I was insulting her——"

"That all?"

"Well, I may have said she was fond of lions; and so she is."

"Yes; but why did he call you a traitress?"

"Because she was his daughter and my hostess, I suppose."

"Will this Mr. Quinsey confirm you?"

"Philip Quinsey?—oh! rather! He's in my pocket."

"Did anybody else overhear you running her down?"

She hesitated a second. "No."

'First lie!' thought Mr. Settlewhite, with his peculiar sweet-sarcastic smile. "What about an American?"

Marjorie Ferrar laughed. "He won't say so, anyway."

"An admirer?"

"No. He's going back to America."

'Second lie!' thought Mr. Settlewhite. "But she tells them well."

"You want an apology you can show to those who overheard the insult; and what we can get, I suppose?"

"Yes. The more the better."

'Speaking the truth there,' thought Mr. Settlewhite.

"Are you hard up?"

"Couldn't well be harder."

Mr. Settlewhite put one hand on each knee, and reared his slim body.

"You don't want it to come into Court?"

"No; though I suppose it might be rather fun."

Mr. Settlewhite smiled again.

"That entirely depends on how many skeletons you have in your cupboard."

Marjorie Ferrar also smiled.

"I shall put everything in your hands," she said.

"Not *them*, my dear young lady. Well, we'll serve him and see how the cat jumps; but he's a man of means and a lawyer."

"I think he'll hate having anything about his daughter brought out in Court."

"Yes," said Mr. Settlewhite, drily. "So should I."

"And she *is* a little snob, you know."

"Ah! Did you happen to use that word?"

"N-no; I'm pretty sure I didn't."

'Third lie!' thought Mr. Settlewhite: 'not so well told.'

"It makes a difference. Quite sure?"

"Not quite."

"He says you did?"

"Well, I told him he was a liar."

"Oh! did you? And they heard you?"

"Rather!"

"That may be important."

"I don't believe he'll say I called her a snob, in Court, anyway."

"That's very shrewd, Miss Ferrar," said Mr. Settlewhite. "I think we shall do."

And with a final look at her from under his long lashes, he stalked, thin and contained, to the door.

Three days later Soames received a legal letter. It demanded a formal apology, and concluded with the words "failing it, action will be taken." Twice in his life he had brought actions himself; once for breach of contract, once for divorce; and now to be sued for slander! In every case he had been the injured party, in his own opinion. He was certainly not going to apologise. Under the direct threat he felt much calmer. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He would call that 'baggage' a traitress to her face again to-morrow, and pay for the luxury, if need be. His mind roved back to when, in the early 'eighties, as a very young lawyer, he had handled his Uncle Swithin's defence against a fellow member of the Walpole Club. Swithin had called him in public "a little touting whipper-snapper of a parson." He remembered how he had whittled the charge down to the word 'whipper-snapper,' by proving the plaintiff's height to be five feet four, his profession the

church, his habit the collection of money for the purpose of small-clothing the Fiji islanders. The Jury had assessed 'whipper-snapper' at ten pounds—Soames always believed the small clothes had done it. His Counsel had made great game of them—Bobstay, Q.C. There *were* Counsel in those days; the Q.C.'s had been better than the K.C.'s were. Bobstay would have gone clean through this 'baggage' and come out on the other side. Uncle Swithin had asked him to dinner afterwards and given him York ham with Madeira sauce, and his special Heidsieck. He had never given anybody anything else. Well! There must still be cross-examiners who could tear a reputation to tatters, especially if there wasn't one to tear. And one could always settle at the last moment if one wished. There was no possibility anyway of Fleur being dragged in as witness or anything of that sort.

He was thunder-struck, a week later, when Michael rang him up at Mapledurham to say that Fleur had been served with a writ for libel in letters containing among others the expressions 'a snake of the first water' and 'she hasn't a moral about her.'

Soames went cold all over. "I told you not to let her go about abusing that woman."

"I know; but she doesn't consult me every time she writes a letter to a friend."

"Pretty friend!" said Soames into the mouthpiece. "This is a nice pair of shoes!"

"Yes, sir; I'm very worried. She's absolutely spoiling for a fight—won't hear of an apology."

Soames grunted so deeply that Michael's ear tingled forty miles away.

"In the meantime, what shall we do?"

"Leave it to me," said Soames. "I'll come up to-night. Has she any evidence to support those words?"

“ Well, she says—— ”

“ No,” said Soames, abruptly, “ don’t tell me over the ’phone.” And he rang off. He went out on to the lawn. Women! Petted and spoiled—thought they could say what they liked! And so they could till they came up against another woman. He stopped by the boat-house and gazed at the river. The water was nice and clean, and there it was—flowing down to London to get all dirty! That feverish, quarrelsome business up there! Now he would have to set to and rake up all he could against this Ferrar woman, and frighten her off. It was distasteful. But nothing else for it, if Fleur was to be kept out of Court! Terribly petty. Society lawsuits—who ever got anything out of them, save heart-burning and degradation? Like the war, you might win and regret it ever afterwards, or lose and regret it more. All temper! Jealousy and temper!

In the quiet autumn light, with the savour of smoke in his nostrils from his gardener’s first leaf bonfire, Soames felt moral. Here was his son-in-law, wanting to do some useful work in Parliament, and make a name for the baby, and Fleur beginning to settle down and take a position; and now this had come along, and all the chatterers and busy mockers in Society would be gnashing on them with their teeth—if they had any! He looked at his shadow on the bank, grotesquely slanting towards the water as if wanting to drink. Everything was grotesque, if it came to that! In Society, England, Europe—shadows scrimmaging and sprawling; scuffling and posturing; the world just marking time before another Flood! H’m! He moved towards the river. There went his shadow, plunging in before him! They would all plunge into that mess of cold water if they didn’t stop their squabbings. And, turning abruptly, he entered his kitchen-garden. Nothing unreal

there, and most things running to seed—stalks, and so on! How to set about raking up the past of this young woman? Where was it? These young sparks and fly-by-nights! They all had pasts, no doubt; but the definite, the concrete bit of immorality alone was of use, and when it came to the point, was unobtainable, he shouldn't wonder. People didn't like giving chapter and verse! It was risky, and not the thing! Tales out of school!

And, among his artichokes, approving of those who did not tell tales, disapproving of any one who wanted them told, Soames resolved grimly that told they must be. The leaf-fire smouldered, and the artichokes smelled rank, the sun went down behind the high brick wall mellowed by fifty years of weather; all was peaceful and chilly, except in his heart. Often now, morning or evening, he would walk among his vegetables—they were real and restful, and you could eat them. They had better flavour than the green-grocer's and saved his bill—middlemen's profit-ting and all that. Perhaps they represented atavistic instincts in this great-grandson of 'Superior Dosset's' father, last of a long line of Forsyte 'agriculturists.' He set more and more store by vegetables the older he grew. When Fleur was a little bit of a thing, he would find her when he came back from the City, seated among the sun-flowers or black currants, nursing her doll. He had once taken a bee out of her hair, and the little brute had stung him. Best years he ever had, before she grew up and took to this gadabout Society business, associating with women who went behind her back. Apology! So she wouldn't hear of one? She was in the right. But to be in the right and have to go into Court because of it, was one of the most painful experiences that could be undergone. The Courts existed to penalise people who were in the right—in divorce, breach of promise, libel and the

rest of it. Those who were in the wrong went to the South of France, or if they did appear, defaulted afterwards and left you to pay your costs. Had he not himself had to pay them in his action against Bosinney? And in his divorce suit had not Young Jolyon and Irene been in Italy when he brought it? And yet, he couldn't bear to think of Fleur eating humble-pie to that red-haired cat. Among the gathering shadows, his resolve hardened. Secure evidence that would frighten the baggage into dropping the whole thing like a hot potato—it was the only way!